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ROYAL ROCK THE ROUND-UP DETECTIVE



OR,

The Neck-and-Neck Race With Rogues.

BY WILLIAM H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "DETECTIVE
CLAXTON," "DANGEROUS DAVE," "DARK
JOHN," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STARTLING REQUEST.

THERE were those who envied the rich man who dwelt in the stone mansion; there were others who thought in a spirit of kindness that he ought to be one of the happiest men in the city of New York. These persons forgot that the shadow of trouble can go where it pleases; they did not know that the grim enemy sat at Nathaniel Huntress's table as a guest whose

JUST THEN THERE WAS A TOUCH ON ROYAL ROCK'S SHOULDER. "YOU ARE
OUR PRISONER!"

presence was sapping the life from his being.

One day he received the morning papers in his private room, and when the servant was gone, turned the sheets with trembling hands, while expanded eyes looked out of a pale, worn face.

Soon he saw something which arrested his attention. He read the head-lines and exclaimed:

"Lost!"

There was utter despair in the word; yet he proceeded to read further, with eager attention. Omitting the display lines, this was the article which so much absorbed his interest:

"The revolution in Mexico is at an end. Official reports from both loyal and insurgent sources show that the last fight has been waged. As was expected, and has been outlined in these columns, the decisive battle took place on the 17th. The loyalists were overwhelmingly successful, and after the opposing force had been nearly exterminated in the stubborn fight, the few survivors surrendered to a man. This leaves not a single armed command of the insurgents in the field, and none can be gathered. The leaders of the revolt will be dealt with in a vigorous manner.

The paper fluttered from the reader's hand.

"Lost!" he repeated, with a groan. "Lost, ruined, disgraced! The last hope is gone; I am on the verge of worse than death!"

He bowed his head upon the table, and for a time there was silence. Then he took the paper up again and looked at the notice with painful attention.

"No hostile force left," he murmured. "All slain or captured. They are, indeed, right when they say the revolution is at an end. It ends the hopes of the insurgents, and what does *that* mean to me? Is there one among them all, dead, dying or captured, who is in worse condition than I? Some of them are done with trouble, but I—I am only begun, and death would be preferable to what I see before me!"

He arose and paced the room with nervous steps.

"What can I do?" he muttered, feverishly. "Is there any possible way of softening the blow which cannot be averted?"

He mused for awhile, and then went to a desk in one corner, opened it and took out a package of papers. He gazed at them as if they were something which was liable to sting him as a serpent might do.

"If I could only make way with them! It would cover nothing, but it would place me in a position a trifle less damaging, perhaps. But, how can they be disposed of?"

Long and carefully he considered the point.

"There is no hope!" he then groaned. "The disgrace must fall, and it means eternal disgrace!"

He leaned his head on his hands and his whole attitude was one of despair. Yet, this man was honored by all. Those who knew him would tell that he was a general of high rank in the United States Army, and that he was honored not only by the Government but by his fellow-citizens. He had been serving on the Southwestern frontier for some years, but was then home on leave of absence. It was understood that his health had been impaired by his service, and he certainly did not look well.

Those who noticed this fact were not aware that it was the canker of mental misery that ailed him.

He sat where he was until a knock sounded at the door. Bidding the applicant enter he was greeted with the sight of a messenger-boy. There was a telegram. He received it, and the messenger waited.

Nathaniel Huntress could hardly govern his trembling hands as he opened the envelope.

One look at the contents was enough to destroy what calmness remained, for he saw it was from Washington, and signed with the name of the Secretary of War, but other eyes were on him, and he did the best he could to be outwardly composed.

Omitting the names and unnecessary technicalities, he read as follows:

"Papers relating to the Mexican affair, which we supposed from your report were

here, are missing from their proper place, and are not to be found. Can you explain?"

General Huntress turned an unnaturally composed face toward the messenger.

"Go to the hall; I will bring the answer there," he directed.

The boy went out.

Once more left alone Huntress mechanically turned his gaze upon the package of papers he had taken from the desk.

"Yes, I can explain!" he muttered. "I can; but, *will* I? Shall I explain, or will it be better to blow my brains out and be done with it?"

He read the message again, and then mechanically took up a pencil to answer it. He did not know what to write, but, after a considerable delay, he resorted to falsehood and penned this reply:

"Papers are here. They were taken by me by accident—I have but just discovered them. Will see they are safe."

He surveyed his work and then smiled bitterly.

"The most flimsy of lies. Little good the Secretary will find in the answer. And what good does it do *me*? It is only a brief reprieve, and if I were a man I should face the danger at once. Why not telegraph that I am a thief, a traitor and a doomed man? Why do I cling so weakly to a respite when I know I cannot save my honor?"

For awhile he was tempted to carry out the plan thus indicated, but the ruling passion is strong in death, and he clung to the respite, if not to hope. He went to the boy and delivered the message he had written, and the youth went out.

Returning to his private room the general again gave his time to thought, and to vain seeking for means of relief. He had repeatedly assured himself there was no hope, but he still sought for an avenue of escape.

Presently there was a knock at the door. It was a mechanical step rather than deliberate design when he answered. If he had stopped to consult his wishes he would still have been alone. The die was cast, however, when he spoke, and a young lady entered.

She was his daughter, Ruth Huntress. Some women are born to be raved over by the impulsive part of mankind. Ruth had all the beauty which usually accompanies the attributes of those thus worshiped, but it could not be said she had been raved over.

There were those who called her cold and calculating. These persons erred, as her more intimate friends knew. Under an unusually calm and systematic exterior beat a heart as warm and tender as any woman possessed. Many knew this, but her composure under all circumstances, and a habit she had of coming out of all situations as a victor, had made her too much respected, not to say feared, for her abilities to make her an object of idolatry from the enthusiastic.

Endowed with a fine face and perfect form, she had the carriage of those who are blessed by rearing and Nature, and this told in her every graceful movement.

She now came to her father's side.

"Is the hermit within?" she asked, with a smile, but her eyes searched Nathaniel Huntress's face with more than the attention of one who jests.

"I am here, as you see," he replied, with an attempt to be at ease outwardly.

"I do see it, and I realize, too, that you are here most of the time. Is this the way to regain your lost health?"

"I think I am gaining."

"Shut up in an office?"

"I cannot drop business wholly."

"You ought not to worry over it."

"Am I doing that?"

Huntress tried to smile as he put the question, but the effort was not successful, and it brought no responsive smile to Ruth's face.

"You surely are. I have not known you all these years to fail to understand you now. You are worrying, and that worries *me*! You said you were ill when we left Washington, and needed rest and relaxation. You are not getting it; your mind is on matters which prevent you from getting good from your leave of absence."

"Don't overestimate it, Ruth. I will not deny that I am unable to get certain mat-

ters out of my mind, but that is the penalty of public cares."

Ruth sighed. She saw she was not going to be taken into his confidence, and his manner more than ever confirmed her fears that he was worrying to his harm.

"When we were in Washington you used to say I was a born statesman," she added. "Don't forget that, and if I can be of any help to you, I will gladly give my aid!"

"I'll remember, my dear, and possibly I may yet call you in."

Kind as Huntress was, she had the impression that he wished to be alone, and she did not fail to let his wish be law with her. After a little more talk she went out, and he was again alone.

He remained looking after her with a sad face.

"She is not to be deceived. Well, why should I try it? The whole world will soon know, and I suppose I might as well speak to her now. But, no; I will shield my reputation to the last. Why should my nearest and dearest ones become aware of the ghastly truth any sooner than is absolutely necessary?"

The general remained in his room during the hours which followed. His reply to the telegram from Washington had been one which he knew would be far from satisfactory. He had not asked for instructions, but this did not prevent him from being sure that such instructions would come.

The War Department would not be willing to let his careless pledge regarding the papers, "Will see they are safe," pass as a settlement of the matter. It was not the way business was done by the Government.

Knowing this he waited for the further orders he felt certain would arrive, but it was later than he had expected when another messenger put in an appearance. Again there was a telegram, and he opened it and read as follows:

"Colonel George Benson will call upon you in the morning. Deliver to him all the papers you have. Guard them well during the delay. There must be no further mistake in this matter."

The expected had come, and it affected Huntress but little. He did not overlook the last sentence, nor fail to understand its meaning. He knew he was blamed at headquarters, and that his disgrace had already begun, but he was singularly apathetic outwardly.

Somehow, he felt like one stunned by misfortune and unable to realize or care for it.

After a long period he took out the papers before mentioned and examined them with care. Only too well did he already know what was there, but he could not resist the temptation. When he put them away he fell into deeper and more serious thought than had been his before. The instinct of self-preservation is strong, and he did not feel so much like taking his disgrace calmly, now he contemplated it more fully.

Why should he not make an effort to save himself? It would not lessen his guilt in point of fact, nor in his own eyes, but he had a long and honorable career to consider, and his family honor, too.

Was it not his duty to spare Ruth shame if he could?

When dinner was ready he did not go down, but had something brought to his room, instead. He ate but little, and then fell into a fresh period of thought. He ended by summoning a servant who rejoiced in the name of Boaz Tucker.

Boaz was a very old man. He had carried Nathaniel Huntress in his arms when the latter was a boy, and had served Nathaniel's father while the latter lived. When he died Boaz had come into the general's own family service.

Boaz had strict sense of duty. He knew no more about military duties and life than he did about the appearance of the North Pole, but he felt himself constrained to do a good deal when he got into a military arena.

This sense of duty often cropped out in peculiarities. One of these was shown as he came in, now. He made a military salute which, if not graceful and elaborate, was more respectful than many more pretentious salutes of like kind in actual service.

"Your servant, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Boaz, sit down," Huntress directed.

Mr. Tucker did so, but in a deprecating way, as if he felt his own unworthiness. He seated himself on the chair cornerwise and waited humbly to hear what his master had to say.

"Boaz," spoke General Huntress, "you have been long in the service of the Huntress family."

"Seventy years, sir; I began as a lad of ten."

"Has your service been pleasant?"

"Mortal man never saw anybody that could beat the Huntress family, general!" declared Boaz.

"Your long and faithful service speaks for itself. It tells of your loyalty as words cannot tell."

"General, I thank you," said Boaz, with a bow.

"Suppose you were called upon to prove your devotion in a way so marked as to be appalling?"

"Nothing could appall me if it was done in the family service!" declared Boaz.

"I am going to prove it."

"Do so, sir!" advised Boaz, with kindling eyes.

"You will be shocked."

"Excuse me, but I shall not. What a Huntress commands I do, sir."

General Huntress looked at the faithful servitor with some embarrassment. Well did he know his good will, but this was all the more reason why he should hesitate. Choking down the feeling he abruptly asserted:

"I wish you to turn burglar!"

"Eh?" gasped Boaz.

"I wish you to turn burglar," the general repeated.

CHAPTER II.

DONE AT NIGHT.

GENERAL HUNTRESS had a son named Ralph. He was a young man of strong and steady mind, and a credit to the family name. The night of the day before referred to Ralph was out until eleven o'clock. When he came in the house was dark but for a dimmed light which burned in the hall. He went to his own room and undressed promptly.

He retired and fell asleep with the facility of youth and an untroubled mind. After that all was a blank for a time. When he awoke it was to start up nervously and with a sense of something wrong.

He sat silent and still, but one idea was in his mind. Finally he muttered the suspicion which moved him:

"Can that have been a revolver shot?"

If it was, it did not necessarily indicate anything of moment, for it might have been in the street, but the matter haunted him unpleasantly. Then he heard sounds on the floor below, and he bounced out of bed.

"Something is astir. Why should that be at this hour?"

Thought of lawless intruders naturally occurred to him, and he threw on his outer garments hurriedly and left the room cautiously. Once in the hall he saw that there was need of caution. Voices sounded in the lower part of the house—excited and loud voices, unless he erred—and he ran down the stairs.

A light was burning in that section, and he saw it was in his father's room. His first fear that something might have happened to the general was in a measure dissipated by sight of him, erect and apparently in good condition, while further surmises were prevented by his own arrival on the scene.

Huntress was there, and with him was Amos Day, the man-of-all-work about the house. Both looked excited.

"What is wrong?" Ralph demanded.

"Burglars have been here!" the general exclaimed.

"Burglars? How did they enter?"

"I know not; I only know they were here. Did you not hear me fire at them, or, at least, at one of them?"

"I did think I was awakened by a revolver shot. Where are they? Have they made good their escape?"

"One of them has, at least. He went out of the front door just as I came up from the basement. I was taken ill and went down. I returned just in time to see them, or one of them. He got safely away."

"Had you no chance to give the alarm?"

"He locked the door after him; I could not."

Ralph hurriedly opened the front door, himself. It had been forced open, and the key was even then on the outside.

"Has anything been taken?" he added.

"Amos says the silver is untouched, but it was only a brief examination he made, of course."

The robber was not in sight, and Ralph did not see any need of great haste at that late time. The fellow had been allowed ample opportunity to get off, and he certainly had not failed to improve the chance. So Ralph reasoned.

"Tell me all about this," he requested.

"It is very simple. I was taken ill, and came down to the basement to get medicine from the dining-room closet. I awakened Amos, and he prepared a drink which I took. I then started up the stairs, and was near the top when I saw the intruder. He was not so plainly revealed that I could tell what he looked like, but it flashed upon me what he was. He revealed and half-raised a slung-shot, but changed his mind and began a hurried retreat. I chanced to have a revolver in my pocket and fired at once. As I have said, he went out of the door in haste. That is all."

"Had he any package, to indicate he had done robbery?"

"I saw none."

"Can it be he was frightened off before accomplishing his purpose?"

"Let us hope so."

"We will make a search, and then see if we can put the police on the track. If the silver is safe, there is not much in the lower part of the house he could take. You had no valuables in your desk, did you?"

Nathaniel Huntress started, and then went hurriedly to the article of furniture named.

"It has been broken open!" Ralph exclaimed.

The general did not answer, but looked quickly to the contents. Then turned his pale face toward his son.

"I have been robbed!" he declared.

"Of what?"

"Most valuable documents."

"Have they money value?"

"No. They are"—Huntress hesitated; then more slowly added, his brow knit and thoughtful, it seemed—"they are Government papers."

"Then the loss may not be so bad. A thief cannot make use of such things. He may return them. In any case, they cannot do much damage, can they?"

"I am not so sure of that. Call the rest of the servants, and have the house searched. We want to see if anything more is gone."

He had waved his hand to Amos as he spoke, and that man rushed away as if the fate of nations depended upon his rapidity. The general sat down and looked so miserable that Ralph asked:

"Are you still ill?"

"Not especially. But," the speaker added, "I shall be blamed for the loss of those papers."

"I am sorry, but I hope it is something which may be remedied. Do not despond."

Huntress rested his head upon his hand. In truth he could not look his son in the face.

"Shall I not go to the police immediately?" Ralph continued.

"Wait until the search is over. Possibly—possibly the thief may have cast the papers aside, somewhere."

Ralph did not feel hopeful on that score, but the return of Amos with Boaz Tucker and Patrick Malone—the latter the family coachman—caused him to defer further words.

"What's this I hear?" demanded Boaz. "We robbed? Say, it ain't possible. Nobody would dare to rob a general!"

Huntress gave him a warning glance.

"But I am robbed," he cautioned.

"Yes, yes; of course. Certain you are; nobody said otherwise. You are robbed, and it was a mighty mean thing."

Boaz had felt it necessary to say something, and now he had done it he manifested a disinclination to say anything more. From that time on he let others do the talking.

It was decided not to awaken Ruth, but

the other rooms were searched with care. It was not found that anything was missing there.

"It is likely that I disturbed the thief just as he was getting to work," suggested the general.

"Shall I not go for the police, now?" asked Ralph.

Huntress was not pleased with the persistence of his son, but his idea was so manifestly right that it could not be opposed. The general made but one restriction. He declared there was no use of having the officers of law trampling over the house during the night, but asked that they would begin their work outside immediately, and send men to the premises as soon as the night had passed.

With this message Ralph went to see the police.

When he returned with his report he found his father sitting in his office in a mood of profound dejection.

"You should not take this so much to heart," Ralph urged.

"Do you know what those papers were?"

"No."

"They were Government documents."

"And is the loss really serious?"

"The loss of any Government paper would be that. I don't know what difficulties this matter will get me into."

Huntress spoke wearily, and his son regarded him with anxiety. For some time he had noticed that his father had not been looking well, and the fact was more than ever apparent. He was pale and wan.

"Let me take charge of this," the younger man urged. "It is nothing you need worry about, and I will see the police whenever necessary. Between us we are sure to solve the riddle and get you out of all trouble in a very short time, I think. Let me attend to it."

"Do as you will."

Huntress spoke without much thought. He was feeling ill in both body and mind, and almost indifferent for the time to all that might occur. Not so with Boaz. He managed to get a private word with his master.

"Say, sir, your boy is too mighty active!" the servitor declared. "Can't you shut him off?"

"Let it go on; there is no other way. Say no more."

Boaz scratched his head doubtfully. He did not like the situation at all. Coming events began to cast their shadows darkly before, and a presentiment of the trouble to come was upon him.

According to Ralph's advice the general finally consented to lie down, and the younger man watched in the private room until day dawned. It was not long after this that there was a ring at the bell and Ralph was soon informed that some one wished to see him.

"A police agent," decided Huntress. "I'll attend to it at once."

By his direction the caller was shown in.

He was a man of impressive appearance. Something like forty years of age, he had all the alertness of youth in his bearing, while his dignity was marked and becoming. He had a fine, athletic form, and was dressed in good taste, though in this respect he was more like a Wall street banker than what one of the detective calling is popularly supposed to be like. His face was not only of manly good looks, but it was strong and resolute. He had the calm, penetrating eyes of a doctor, and would have drawn more than passing attention in any sphere of life.

This gentleman bowed gravely.

"Mr. Huntress?" he politely inquired.

"I am Ralph Huntress, sir."

"The gentleman who was at the police station?"

"The same."

"It is you I wish to see. I am a detective, and my name is Royal Rock. I was sent by the precinct captain to answer the request you made for help in regard to the burglary committed here last night."

"You are very welcome, sir. Pray sit down. My father, who is the one chiefly interested, has not yet arisen, but I am the one you wish to see."

Royal Rock bowed. The last statement had been politely made and he did not dis-

pute it, but he was not so sure of this assertion made. He thought it might prove he wanted to see more than one person.

"I shall be glad to hear the story," he admitted.

CHAPTER III. SUSPICION.

THE hour was still early when another man approached the house. He was of military bearing, and really bore the title of colonel, yet he was not a soldier. His name was George Benson, and he was an agent of the United States Government.

He rung the bell and delivered his card to the servant who answered the call.

"For General Huntress," he laconically remarked.

He was given place in the parlor and the servant went away. There was not much delay when a young man appeared who bore the card in his hand.

"I am Ralph Huntress," he said, simply, "and I am here to represent my father. I presume you have called—"

"On business with the general," quietly reminded the visitor.

"And to get the papers?"

"Exactly."

"I regret to say we have had a very unfortunate occurrence here. A burglar entered the house last night, and among the things he took was the package of papers."

Agent Benson looked both surprised and shocked.

"How could that be?"

"Well, I don't see why they are less easily taken than any other documents—"

"They would have been had they been in a safe."

"We have none."

"And you found no safe place for them, it seems."

There was a brief delay. The pause changed things very much. Both had been inclined to speak with more warmth than appeared necessary, and each now grew cautious. The agent remembered he was dealing with the representative of a man honored in the service of the country, while Ralph, scenting trouble for his father, was diplomatic enough to proceed to appease such an important factor in the case as the agent.

Quietly he told the story of the robbery as he understood it.

Benson listened with close attention. He did not dream of doubting the truth of all he was told, and he did not care to discuss the matter in detail with any one but the elder Huntress.

"Where is the general, now?" he inquired, presently.

"With a detective we have called in."

"I would like to see him."

"He bade me bring you to him as soon as the story was told to you, sir. Please follow me."

The agent was willing, and they were soon in the private room. The men with titles were no strangers, and they shook hands at once. Benson was introduced to Royal Rock.

"This is a most unfortunate affair, Benson," remarked Huntress, with an air of nervousness.

"According to my information the lost Government papers were valuable."

"They were."

"Of what nature?"

"They related to negotiations I had with the Mexican troops while I was on the Southwest border. They should have been left in charge of the Secretary of War when I was in Washington, but through some mischance this was not done. I came here to recuperate, and had my mind so little on business that when word came from the Government that papers were missing I was startled. I looked in my private property and found them. Imagine my surprise!"

It was not a sincere statement, but the general had to say something.

"Have you telegraphed to Washington?"

"No."

"It must be done at once."

"We may get trace of them."

"Is there a clue?"

Huntress looked at Royal Rock.

"Does what I have been able to tell you give any clue?" he asked.

Quietly replied the detective:

"I shall have to sift it further before saying definitely, but I would not advise you to rely upon seeing the missing things immediately."

Benson looked troubled. He did not like the aspect of the case. He felt that Huntress ought to have found a safer place for the papers, after once learning that he had them, and yet he did not like to speak with direct censure to one so high in the Government service.

He did know, however, that unless the mystery was soon cleared up there would be those who would speak in this way. The officials at the National Capital would not stop to consider Huntress's own position.

The dispatch which bade him call and get the papers had been so expressed as to show strong dissatisfaction back of it, and he knew not what would be the result when it was known the documents were gone.

He turned to Royal Rock.

"Mr. Rock, you are well known to me as a sagacious detective. Since you have been called into this case, may I ask if you can continue in it?"

"I can, if wished."

"I am in the Government Secret Service, but this is not in my line of business. I can study on is, but run the thief down—no! A regular detective is needed for that duty, and the fact that you are called the 'Detective Expert' has not escaped my recollection. I would like to have you continue on the case."

"As you wish."

"What is your theory?"

"Oh, General Huntress tells me he scared the thief off before he had time to do much. It seems he was only beginning, and merely secured the papers named."

It was not a very direct reply, but no one seemed to notice the evasion. It was an evasion. Royal Rock did not intend to tell all he knew if he was going into the matter to make or lose a reputation by it.

"Is it not a fact," asked Benson, "that certain jobs, so-called, are very much like certain crooks, and that the police of this city know in many cases just about where to look when they see the work of an illegal hand?"

"In many cases, yes."

"How about this matter?"

"Being an ordinary burglary it is hard to see any further into it at present. It requires time to sift it out."

"But this matter is so important that any delay is of vital danger. Remember, it is the United States Government that calls."

"I am well aware of the fact, but even this cannot lead to impossibilities. I will give my best services to the cause if desired, but to catch a thief off-hand is something the most remarkable of detectives cannot always accomplish."

"Excuse me if I seemed to call for undue haste. Of course impossibilities are not expected, and I will leave you to the dictates of your own judgment. I am a Secret Service officer, but detective work is my duty only in a general way. This is not in my line. It is in yours—go in and do your best, and you will find the Government a good paymaster if you accomplish what you are required to do."

"It shall be as you wish."

Ralph was impressed with the manner of the man upon whom the task of finding the lost papers devolved. Royal Rock was essentially a modest man in his manner, but he had a show of reserve power which made due impression.

If he was not shrewd Ralph judged him wholly wrong, and he expected much from his investigation.

The detective now went over the whole house and looked with his big, analytical eyes, but what he thought nobody knew. Benson was anxious to be in the secret, but as he was told nothing he concluded he was simply kept in the dark because he could be told nothing.

Rock must have time to get at the secret.

Boaz Tucker had been ready to show all that he had discovered the method by which the thief entered the house at the start, and to support his theory he showed marks on the basement door which, certainly, looked like those of a burglarious instrument. There were scratches there, and nobody disputed that they had been made as he claimed.

The detective was shown this evidence by the servitor, and he did not express doubt. Boaz tried to worm from him a statement that he regarded this as proof positive, but the investigator was non-committal.

He had another interview with Huntress before leaving the house. The general dreaded this talk, but there was nothing to worry him.

Royal Rock was polite and deferential.

When he had gone the premises were cleared of all outsiders. Benson could not see that he was needed there, and he went back for the time to his own quarters, to get an answer as quickly as possible to the telegram he had sent to Washington.

Nathaniel Huntress seemed in a worse physical condition than before. Ralph and Ruth undertook to console him.

"You are not to blame for this," asserted the daughter.

"It will not be thought of in that light at Washington."

"How can they blame you?"

"The papers should have been in the capital, not here."

"You merely forgot them."

"A soldier should forget nothing."

"They may be recovered before word comes from your superiors."

The general shook his head.

"They would be of no use to a thief, but he would be more likely to throw them away than to return them. I have but little hope of getting this muddle straightened out aright."

"And if you do not?"

"The Government at Washington will act."

The tone in which this was said was so significant that Ruth and her brother exchanged glances. They knew the general was not the man to be downcast over a trifle, and his present manner spoke for itself.

"Can't we help you in some way?" Ralph inquired.

"There is nothing to be done but to await the action of my superiors. They will do everything."

"Surely, you will not be blamed for what the thief did?"

"The trouble does not lie there. The papers should have been in the hands of the War Department, not here. That will be the ground for complaint."

The general spoke with unfailing patience, though he did not find the subject one of pleasure or interest. Between him and his children there had always been a bond of unusual sympathy, and this it was which made him consent to pursue such a vain conversation.

They saw he was not in sympathy with the discussion, and a motion from Ruth caused both to drop it as soon as possible and arouse no suspicion. He shortly after expressed a desire to lie down and rest, and they left him alone.

"Brother," said Ruth, outside, "there is something in this which I cannot grasp. Father is not like himself, and it is plain to me he has something on his mind of which we know nothing. He is in trouble, and has been ever since we came back to New York. Can it be the loss of these documents was not the first step in the matter?"

"What do you suspect?" Ralph asked, uneasily.

"I don't know what to think. I have absolutely no clue, and cannot grasp the solution of the riddle. I wish we could help our father. He is not as young as he was once, and is ill able to bear any such load as this."

"We would both fight for him if he would let us into the mystery, if there is one. But what can it be? Surely, nothing he is to blame for."

"True, but a public man is often forced into difficulties against his will."

"This Benson will let nothing escape him. I know his reputation well. He is a keen man all bound up in his work, and anxious to make a reputation. We should make poor headway against him."

"Don't be so sure of that!" exclaimed Ruth, her eyes sparkling with sudden light. "We may be nothing in his sight, but we have wit and loyalty. Don't get the idea we could do nothing. But here we are talking as if father's reputation could be at stake. We are absurd!"

Miss Huntress laughed, but it was not a natural laugh. Worried before the loss of the papers was made known, she had noticed since then that the general's manner had not been natural. He had not dealt with the episode of the lost documents as he was wont to deal with difficulties.

She was ill at ease without knowing just why.

"Anyhow," she added, presently, "we are not in this world to be mere clods, and if we see use for other talents I think we shall not be found wanting."

CHAPTER IV.

A WOMAN OF PLOTS.

WHETHER General Huntress slept or not nobody but himself knew, but he had not yet come out of the privacy of his room when there was a caller who wished to see him.

It was a woman of about thirty years, and one whose personal appearance was certainly striking. She had a kind of beauty which would have arrested any one's attention, though a close observer would not have found much in it to admire. It was not that which went with refinement, but it was worthy of classification under the term used, and this, with her manner, gave her title to brilliancy. She was well dressed, and would have passed in many circles of life as a star of the first magnitude.

Her card was brought to Nathaniel Huntress.

He read the name upon it.

"Senora Maude Hollywood!" he exclaimed, with a start. "That woman here?"

If the caller could have seen and heard him then she would have been flattered by the impression she had made. Certainly, she had experienced no tame greeting at a distance.

Huntress grew paler, if possible, and his hand shook as he held the bit of pasteboard. That woman there! Yes, she was there, and he had cause to be alarmed over the fact. Soldier that he was, he felt like taking to flight. He wanted to refuse to see her, but he dared not. He must see her—

Suddenly remembering a servant was present he assumed his most dignified air.

"Show the lady in," he directed.

The servant went out.

"Maude here!" the soldier muttered. "Great heavens! is she, too, bent on running me down?"

Forgetting all else he began to pace the room with quick, nervous steps. He was thus engaged when there was a rustling of a dress and he was no longer alone. He turned. The caller was there.

With a deft motion she closed the door in the face of the slow servitor, and then her handsome face grew radiant. She almost rushed forward in her haste to reach the officer. Seizing his hand she struck an attitude and exclaimed:

"Long live the Republic! Down with the foe! Old comrade, I live again now I touch your hand!"

It was an effusive greeting, and she made it more so by shaking the imprisoned hand with zeal.

General Huntress looked at her as if he had seen a worse foe than the agent of the Government could be under any circumstances.

"Why, have you nothing to say, comrade?" cried the woman. "Are we so soon forgot? Is it nothing that we campaigned together under the Southern sun?"

"I—I am surprised to see you," muttered the general, weakly.

"A soldier should never be surprised. It was not so in the old days. Why, we fought both factions with all the vim in the world. Surprise us? Never, never! Ah! those were days to be proud of—we slept where we tired out, and eat when we could, but if we went sleepless or hungry it was all one to us!"

There was a mixture of enthusiasm and fanatical zeal in this address, but it found no echo in Huntress's manner. He remained grave, and the shadow of trouble was never deeper on his face. He felt the need of saying something, and did so, but it was plain it was not in a sympathetic way.

"I was not aware you were in New York."

"I have but just come. Naturally, I

headed for here the first thing. Old comrades have that way."

"Yes," the general agreed, weakly.

"There is great news from Mexico."

"Yes."

"No more of war; no more of fighting and campaigning! One side wiped out of existence. Do you know, general, I'll bet anything I can tell to a dot which side you are with, now. People never give any sympathy to the under dog in the fight."

"You must remember that while the Mexicans were fighting I was still an American citizen."

Senora Hollywood laughed merrily.

"Oh! we know each other, my friend! The lost cause gets no love now. Why, I am the most ardent loyalist in the world! Long live the Republic, and down with all traitors!"

Again she laughed, and there was something in her manner as if she was uttering a great joke. So she was, from her point of view.

"Are you to be in New York long?"

"I am open to an invitation."

"An invitation?"

"Yes; old comrades don't meet every day, you know. When I learned you were in the city I headed for your house with speed. Here is one man who will give shelter to a lone woman, thought I."

The hint was too plain not to be seen, and, what was more unfortunate, Huntress dared not refuse to see it.

"My home is open to you, of course," he replied, "but you have come at an unfortunate time. There is trouble here, and if you stay you may get enmeshed in it."

"What trouble?"

"I have been robbed of papers of value, and there will be Government secret agents in the house at all times, perhaps."

"I have never plotted against the United States."

The general sighed. He wished he could say as much.

"What were these papers?" Senora Hollywood abruptly added.

"I cannot explain their nature."

"I'll wager something they related to the affair on the border."

"Whatever they were," replied the general, with much of his old force, "it behooves you and me to be discreet. The past is not so irrevocably dead that we can afford to be rash—"

"Right, comrade; right! I may want to go to dear old Mexico again—I shall want to; and the ghost of the past must be kept in bounds. I think I understand. I am to be mute and innocent. Ah! you shall see I have not forgotten how to play the part. As for loyalty, general, you know you can depend upon me."

Nathaniel Huntress did not know it. His acquaintance with Maude Hollywood was too complete to give rise to any such idea. She was simply a political adventuress, and unscrupulous at that.

Her father had been an American, but her mother was of Mexican blood, and that blood was so well reproduced in Maude that she was as ready to scheme as any of the people of that land of revolutions. Her private character was good, as far as the general knew, but in politics she was a schemer and, also, as shifty as the wind. Just now she was cheering for the successful party in Mexico, but he knew she had been with the opposition until they seemed bound to go down.

Unfortunately, she knew as much about him as he did about her.

He would have been glad to deny her the shelter of his home, but he dared not. Such being the case he did the next best thing.

"Should you come here," he explained, "all your wit will be required. You must know nothing except that you are devoted in a mild way—understand, in a mild way—to the successful side. Sink your politics as far as possible. Be wise and prudent, or it will go hard with us both."

"I am with you."

"Shall you be in town long?"

"You asked that before. I don't know."

"You are liable to meet with embarrassing encounters. Mexican and American politicians will alike be here."

"Better still! I like that!" cried Maude, in rapture.

Huntress sighed. He saw how hopeless it was to try and move her. He gave it up. She must come into the family. He hoped she would do no harm, but his courage was not good.

"If you are to come I will call my daughter—"

"The charming girl of whom you told me in our campaigning days? Let me see—she was in Washington, was she not?"

"Yes."

"Excellent! I shall be delighted to see her!"

"You will be discreet?"

"Most certainly."

"Of course she knows nothing about—about politics."

"I understand. Yes, and I'll be as mute as you please. Trust me. I never betray an old comrade!"

It was a happy recommendation, for she had certainly gone against her comrades in Mexico, but he had to take the pledge. He moved toward the door and then stopped short.

"Wait!" he added. "You must sink politics utterly, and be plain Maude Hollywood—"

"What! and never hurrah for the successful cause?"

"Never!"

"Ye gods! I can't agree to that!" and she looked sincerely unhappy.

"It must be so. I am on delicate ground here, and a little break would ruin all. You can pose as a lady who was traveling on the border and was caught in the war trouble; hence your knowledge of me. Further than that you must not go. Sink the patriot, or you will sink both of us. Your record is not perfect, Maude."

Huntress was growing firmer, and his manner was convincing and firm. The adventuress realized all of this and governed herself accordingly. She sighed and answered:

"Have it as you will. Instead of a political beggar I will pose as a lady of means who was caught in the flood of circumstances when you were campaigning on the border. Yes, I'll be meek and mute. Call in your daughter."

Her resignation was sincere, but the general was by means sure she would be able to restrain her natural bents. As a schemer in her own line she was wily, but in other things she was too headstrong by far.

He rung the bell and sent for Ruth, who soon came.

Huntress introduced the ladies, adding in regard to the visitor:

"This is a lady who was in the Southwest when I was—"

"Traveling for amusement!" cried Maude.

"Amusement! Ye gods! but if it amuses one to be driven from pillar to post by hostile armies I know not what would be called grief! I understand you were in Washington at that eventful period, Miss Huntress. Thank your lucky stars it was so. You don't know what American citizens can suffer in spite of chivalrous generals and captains!"

It was a good beginning, and the host began to breathe a little freer. If Maude did not lose her head something good might come of it, for he thought she would be the means of taking Ruth's attention off from himself and his gloom in a degree.

Maude did not ask any one to do any talking in the next few minutes. She rattled along at a race-horse speed, saying all in a bewildering fashion, but she finally talked herself out of breath.

Ruth had made out that she was to be a guest for a time, and she now did her duty as she did to all her father's friends.

While there was no warmth, Maude could not complain of the welcome accorded her.

As soon as circumstances seemed to demand, a servant was called and Mrs. Hollywood was escorted to a room. When she had gone, father and daughter looked at each other. Huntress was afraid of her companion's well-known discernment, but he saw only a smile on Ruth's face.

"If we want for talking after this we shall be obliged to take all the blame upon ourselves," the girl quietly remarked.

"Mrs. Hollywood is certainly a rapid speaker," the general admitted.

"Did you know her well?"

"She was under our protection for some time while we were watching the rival Mexican forces. You will remember we were there to see they did not get American soil mixed with that of their own land, and try to fight on our side. They did get over in spite of us, now and then, and the guerrilla warfare made it unpleasant for non-combatants like—like all who were there."

He tripped on his remark, remembering that no soldier in camp had enjoyed the events as much as Maude Hollywood did.

"She is to remain here, I judge?"

"For a time. I can't say how long."

Huntress tried to speak carelessly, as if it was a matter of but small importance. It occurred to Ruth that Maude's coming was most untimely, but she made no such comment.

Whether this idea was correct or not Maude was in the house, and that meant a good deal with one of her nature. Scheming women have made and unmade kingdoms, and there was no knowing what this one might do in her blind zeal to be at the top of the heap every time.

CHAPTER V.

A HUNTED MAN.

NIGHT fell. The Huntress house had become quiet, and the last of the visible lights had gone out. If any of the latter still burned it was not visible from the street.

Down the block came a single man with slow and uncertain steps. He had just dodged the patrolman deftly, and now had a clear field for some time. He was improving the opportunity but in a manner which told of abject fear.

He skulked like a hunted wolf, and shivered at each natural sound of the night until convinced that it was nothing which heralded harm to him.

He reached the front of the general's house, and there came to a stop. His eyes searched the whole front for some sign, and then he shivered again. His hand passed over his eyes, and he muttered indistinct words. With faltering steps he approached the basement door.

This he tried, but it was locked. He shook the iron structure lightly, but nothing came of it. Then he rapped gently on the dining-room window.

The man was a stranger to New York and its methods. Had it been otherwise he would not have expected an answer to such a summons at that hour; but, luck was with him. The shade was drawn aside, and a human face appeared within. It was that of Boaz Tucker.

The latter had expected to see a beggar. He now thought he did see one, but the pallor of the face, and its scared look arrested his attention and caused him to look more attentively. The person outside made a motion for the window to be raised, and Boaz concluded to obey. Instantly the untimely caller stretched out his hands in a fashion of entreaty.

"Does the General Huntress live here?" he asked, humbly.

"Well, rather," Boaz admitted.

"I want to see him."

"Thunder and lightning!"

The emphatic expression was lost upon the caller, but it expressed a good deal. Under any circumstances the old servitor would have been amazed to see a master of his have a visitor of such a stamp at such an unseasonable hour, while for a Huntress to be thus placed was even more astonishing.

Boaz stood still until the stranger spoke again.

"Will you please go at once?" he asked, meekly.

"Why, man, I can't go to the general at this time of night. It is a perfectly crazy idea."

"Ask him—"

"I am judge enough of that. I wouldn't think of it. He's in bed, and sleeping peacefully. Call him up? Why, it's ridiculous! Go away, and come to-morrow and send in your card like a gentleman."

"I must see him immediately. Good, sir, do not keep me waiting. My word for it, the general will see me if he but knows I am here. Go, sir, go! It is very, very important."

The applicant had grown more nervous.

He had reasons for not wanting to be on the street, and the delay alarmed him more than even his trembling tongue could tell. His fear was too apparent to escape notice.

Boaz had been using his eyes, and he began to waver in his position. He noticed that the applicant was a foreigner of some sort, and he began to suspect what the sort was. He was not so sure that his master did not want to see him.

Hesitating for awhile, he asked:

"Who shall I say wants to see him?"

"Take this note, good, sir; take it, and it will explain all."

Brightening a little the stranger put forth an envelope, and Boaz took it gingerly.

"I'll see," he agreed.

He turned away. The applicant called to him and asked him to be admitted to the house, but the request was undecided. Boaz went his way and was soon at the door of the general's private room. He had expected the latter to be in bed, but a faint light shining from under the door told a different story.

He knocked, and was soon in the officer's presence.

"There's a singular party outside who wants to see you, general," Boaz reported. "He is a curious bird, if I may so bluntly term it, and I don't go sponsor for him, but here is a thing he told me to give you."

The note was extended.

"A man at this hour?" murmured Huntress. "That is peculiar."

There was a shadow of trouble in his voice, and he broke the seal of the letter quickly. The note was not long and he had soon mastered its contents. Dismay was imprinted on his face.

"More trouble!" he exclaimed.

"What now, general? If he's an interloper you have only to say the word and he will sleep in a prison cell, you bet!"

"Not for the world!" hastily answered Huntress. "Boaz, he is a Mexican who figured prominently in the late difficulties."

"Ah!"

"He was supposed to be an adherent of the loyal cause, but he believed he saw a way to benefit himself by turning over to the other side. He did so, and now he is under the ban of the victors. It is probable they are hunting him."

"Thunder! you want to get rid of him."

"I dare not!"

"Don't dare?"

"No. He was too intimately connected with my own operations there. I dare not send him adrift—I must see him, and trust to luck that he can be got rid of soon. If he wants money he shall have his fill. You will have to bring him in. Do it quietly, Boaz, so as to let no one else know of this case. Go!"

Boaz went, but his face was long. Walking toward the door again he muttered:

"The Huntress family is drifting into deep waters. Lord grant this thing won't last long!"

He reached the basement door and opened it at once. The shivering man on the outside came in quickly.

"General Huntress will see you," the servitor explained.

His hand was grasped by the applicant and fervid kisses were pressed upon it.

"May the saints bless you!" cried the Mexican. "May you never want for a friend, and trouble never cross your threshold. The prayers of Lucio Cano will always be yours."

"Is your name Lucio Cano?"

"It is, senor; it is."

"Well, Lucio, don't make a mess of this visit. My master is not well—"

"Nor am I. Ah, ah! we shall know how to sympathize with one another in good earnest."

"I hope so."

Lucio had so much zeal mixed up with his trembling fears that Boaz gave up the idea of telling what to do and what not to do, and he conducted him up to the next room and to the general's room. He saw Lucio run forward and seize Huntress's hand, and then he closed the door. He was shut out, but he waited in the hall ready to obey any call.

"The fellow is scared out of his wits," he murmured. "Wonder if he really need

be so much afraid as he is? Them Mexicans are desperate chaps when they get to going."

In the meanwhile Lucio was shaking the general's hand persistently and talking rapidly.

"Ah, general, my good general, this is joy; this is bliss! I had feared I should not find you, and my heart was heavy. Now it is light, and hope appears once more on the horizon. Ah, ah! I am sore beset, and it is bliss to see you once more. May the saints be kind to you forever, Senor General!"

Huntress did not share this rapture.

"I did not think to see you," he remarked, not over-warmly.

"I never thought to reach here alive."

"No?"

"I am a hunted man."

"Hunted by whom?"

"Ah! who but the enemies I have made? Do you not know the malignant hatred of success? Those who have conquered know no mercy. They forget I am a human being, too. They hound me, and there is no mercy!"

It was a fervent complaint, made with many gestures and much force. Lucio Cano was deeply moved, and his manner was almost wild.

"Do you mean that you are really as bad off as you say?"

"I mean it all. They know I turned against them, and they hunt me! as if I were a wolf."

"To arrest you?"

"So they say, but there is more. They talk of arrest and extradition, but let them find me and there would be nothing to extradite. I see the daggers of the foe in the air."

"Be calm. You are in America."

"Will that save me from the daggers? No, no; nothing can save me—nothing but to keep away from them. Like you, good general, I know the secrets of both parties, and I know too much. My tongue is not wanted in the peace! Ah! why did I go against my own party? Saint Catherine defend me! I have suffered too much! Yes, I am hunted, and they will kill me if they can!"

Nathaniel Huntress looked anxiously at the nervous speaker. He did not need to ask many questions, and he was prepared to believe the night-visitor was in danger.

There was more than Lucio mentioned—every danger which menaced the Mexican menaced him, too. Possibly he did not need to think of assassination—he had not thought that he did—but Cano's crimes and his own were in many respects alike. Both had turned to the faction of the insurgents when they seemed likely to succeed, and both were now in danger, in consequence. Lucio was disgraced already; he was liable to be in the same condition, but while Lucio had suffered only like a disappointed rebel in a land of revolutions he, the proud general, would suffer as only an American traitor could.

"You have seen them on your track?" he asked.

"Yes, yes!"

"Who are they?"

"I know not their names."

"How did you avoid them?"

"As the hunted wolf!"

"Were you seen to come here?"

"I think not."

"Do you need money to flee?"

"Saint Catherine! I dare not flee!"

"Dare not?"

"I should be hunted down. What I desire is an asylum; a place where I can hide until I know their first rage is over."

"Have you friends in New York?"

"None but you, and that is why I have come to you. Old comrade, I am in dire need. Let me lie in your friendly house until this blows over. It is death to me to go out!"

CHAPTER VI.

FOES WITHIN AND WITHOUT.

GENERAL HUNTRESS gazed at his companion in fresh trouble. The request was natural enough, but it meant more to the general than it did to Lucio Cano. The house was not the proper place for any one to take refuge at that time, and with his own

difficulties weighing so heavily upon him he did not feel like adding to them.

He questioned the refugee further, and established the fact that he was, indeed, a stranger in a strange place. Of all the people of New York he knew only the general, and had no one else to whom to turn.

It placed Huntress in a painful position.

If he had been ever so hard-hearted he would not have dared to send Lucio away. Once their interests had been mutual, and the refugee knew too much of him to be safe. If angered he would probably tell all he did know, and, even if this was not the case, he doubtless would be led to relate about as much, if captured, no matter how friendly he might feel.

Clearly, the general's own future required him to shelter Cano, and keep him from his foes.

But how could it be done?

If a refuge was found outside it must be planned for; it could not be found that night. For the time being he must be kept where he was.

Huntress reached this conclusion with a shrinking heart. He knew not what movement Royal Rock and George Benson would make the next day, and he was alarmed at the thought of having in the house one who might be proved of just the same faction as himself, but so it must be.

He summoned Boaz Tucker, who was faithfully waiting in the hall.

"Where can we hide this man?" he abruptly asked.

Boaz looked shocked.

"Hide him?" he repeated.

"Yes. We must find a temporary refuge on our own premises. What can you suggest?"

The servant looked at Lucio Cano as if the refugee was likely to breed some epidemic. So he was, but not in the usual sense of the term.

"The loft is the only place," Boaz answered, after a pause. "The trunk room will be big enough for him."

"But what if it is searched?"

"There's a place, even then. I remember, if you don't, that there is a recess off of the trunk-room. It's a spot close under the eaves where Master Ralph did some carpenter work when he was a boy, to have a place to hide away from his sister and have some fun. The recess is there, now, and nobody would be likely to see it unless they were in the secret. I must say it's a capital hiding-place, sir."

"I know nothing of it, but it promises something from your description. Lead the way there."

Boaz obeyed unwillingly. He did not fancy the idea of this wild-eyed refugee coming under their roof. Against him he had nothing personally, but events had given the faithful servitor such a feeling of trouble to come that he regarded the man as a fresh menace.

The three went up to the upper floor with slow and careful steps.

It was an area where the ceiling was but little above their heads as they stood erect, and except for two rooms at the front it had no part finished off. The trunk-room was at the back, where the ceiling was the lowest, and once in it, it seemed only a barren tract given over to rubbish. Boaz soon showed there was more to be seen. He removed a board, and a recess was uncovered.

It was a small place, indeed, but it was much to the refugee. Air enough for his purpose must necessarily percolate through the interstices, and he could lie down, too.

Of course the trunk-room would be his refuge as long as possible, but if it was invaded he could retreat to the smaller den and, it seemed, be reasonably safe.

He could replace the board from either side, and it was so fitted that there did not appear to be much danger of its nature being discovered by any searcher.

"As for food," explained the general, "we shall, of course, keep you well supplied. Anyway, it will be but a short danger, for I will see you in a far safer place by to-morrow night."

"Senor," cried Lucio, "I thank you from the bottom of my heart! Your goodness to an unfortunate will not be forgotten, and if I ever get up again you shall find that I am

no ingrate. But may you never be in trouble, yourself."

Huntress and Boaz exchanged glances. It was not their purpose to make a confidant of Lucio Cano, but the unhappy general considered himself quite as deeply in trouble already as Cano could be.

Arrangements were duly completed.

Boaz brought blankets and made a bed in the smaller compartment, and then raided the pantry to such an extent that Lucio would have enough to eat for a couple of days, at the least. When this was mentioned to him he looked doubtful.

"Surely, I am to see you before then?" he asked.

"Senor Cano, I may as well tell you that you are not the only one in difficulty," Huntress replied. "The shadow of this accursed rebellion in your native land is far reaching, and I, too, am caught in the under-tow. I say this in confidence, and it will ruin you and myself, both, if you betray the fact—"

"I swear by the saints I will be as silent as the grave!" cried Lucio. "Do I not owe all to you? Ah! may Heaven bless you!"

He wrung the general's hand with zeal, but the latter had thought only for practical matters.

"I know not when we shall be able to come to you, but I certainly hope we can take you to a safer refuge to-morrow night. Let us all live in that expectation. But, Cano, if you hear any one in the house you are not to uncover yourself. Spies have been here—"

"Saint Catherine!"

"And they may come again."

"Ah, ah!"

Lucio looked around as if he expected to see men emerging from the corners of the attic, but none came.

Without being unduly confidential the general added to his warning sufficiently so that there did not appear to be danger that the refugee would do anything rash, and then, with many a caution, they left and went below. Huntress dropped into a chair.

"You're ill!" exclaimed Boaz.

"I am; I am ill in both body and mind."

"You must sleep and not let things worry you—"

"How can I do either while this state of affairs lasts?"

"It's hard," admitted Boaz, with a deep sigh.

"Sometimes I think I may as well give up the vain struggle. The truth is bound to come out, sooner or later. Why not let it be at once? Why fight a useless fight? I only add to my sorrows."

"Don't give up, general; don't give up!" urged Boaz, his eyes wet with tears.

"Faithful friend! you stand by me always, don't you?"

"May my tongue be palsied when I fail to do it, sir!"

"I know you well, but you are feeble. How feeble we are! There was a time when I was strong, in one sense, but I am old, now, and shaken in health. And we, in our feebleness, are opposed to the full powers of the United States Government."

"We are in the lead, so far."

"Wait until the morrow."

Boaz shook his head. Like his master he dreaded to see the morrow, for he did not see how they could meet all the danger successfully.

"This Lucio Cano has come at a most untimely season," went on the old soldier. "If he is discovered here we certainly are doomed, but I trust we may get him out of the house before his presence is suspected. Now, Boaz, let us to bed. I doubt if we sleep, but we can try. Go, friend, and pray for better luck."

He reached out his hand, and Boaz seized and shook it warmly; then with the animal-like devotion of his nature he raised it to his lips.

"God save the Huntress honor!" he murmured.

They parted.

The remainder of the night passed in quietude, and though there were some haggard faces the next morning the members of the household were all in their usual places. Huntress bore his troubles better than was to be expected, and his manner had much of its olden evenness when he was with his children at breakfast.

Shortly after the morning meal was dis-

patched Agent George Benson put in his appearance. Alone with the general he asked:

"Any news?"

"None. And you?"

"The police report nothing. As to Washington—"

He paused and looked somewhat embarrassed.

"As to Washington?" questioned Huntress, calmly.

"I have dispatches from there which advance the idea that the thief having gained nothing, here, may return, and I am ordered to put a man on guard here—in your house, mind you"—Benson grew more embarrassed—"and see if we can catch him."

The general's eyes dilated. He regarded the affair from his own standpoint, and it seemed to him this was sure proof that he was suspected. Such proof did not exist, whatever might be the facts, but he was not in mood to weigh the evidence calmly.

In his view he was a suspected thief; perhaps almost convicted.

"A very good plan," he answered, steadily. "Let it be carried out."

"I have sent for a young officer, a West Point graduate."

"Very well."

"Will it be agreeable to you to give him shelter?"

"Most certainly. I do not think the thief will put in an appearance again, for he was too rudely frightened away, but I suppose all possible means should be tried to get at the desired end. He may be captured by the device."

"Like you, I doubt it, but such are the orders from the capital."

"Let the plan be tried."

Huntress was surprised at his own coolness. Taking the view of the matter he did it was the placing of a spy upon him as a suspected man, yet he met it all without visible perturbation.

"Shall you be here, also?" he asked.

"Only at times, and then but to watch my men. I refer to the young officer mentioned and to Royal Rock."

"What is he doing?"

"I don't know. He does not seem to be very busy over the case, yet his superiors assure me he will make a record."

Huntress did not answer. He had noticed that Royal Rock had the calm, keen eye he had often noticed in the successful soldier, and he was afraid of him—far more so than of the Government agent.

Benson stayed but a short time. When he was gone Boaz Tucker came to his master. He looked freshly worried.

"General, we are watched!" he suddenly announced.

"Watched?"

"Yes; a spy has appeared in the house across the way, and he has his eye on this house, sure as you live. He has got a place up in an upper window, and is acting the spy and seeing all that goes on here!"

CHAPTER VII.

WORDS OF ALARM.

GENERAL HUNTRESS gazed at his servitor with fading color.

"How do you know this?" he asked.

"By looking. I made up my mind I was bound to keep my eyes open, and I did so. Now, I ain't a prying body, but I do know what is going on among the neighbors, and who lives in each house all along the block. A new person has appeared in Morgan Pryor's house, and he's taken position by the window and is spying on our house. That is sure as you draw the breath of life!"

Boaz wagged his gray head, and looked quite as serious as his sorely-tried master.

"Show me this man," directed the general.

They went to a proper place, and, screened by the lace curtains, gazed out. Truly, there was a man sitting by the opposite window, apparently reading.

"Looks innocent, don't he?" inquired Boaz, "but he ever and anon slyly a glance over here to see what is going on."

"It may be only curiosity."

"It might, but it's more," stubbornly insisted Boaz.

Huntress watched the object of suspicion. He did look out at their own residence

occasionally, and, though there might be nothing in that, the general was in a mood to bestow doubt and suspicion upon all things, so he began to believe with Boaz. As to the house across the way, it was owned by a man who was no friend of the general, and it would not be odd if he should lend himself to a scheme like this.

"Boaz, you are a man of more than usual shrewdness. Do you give it as your serious opinion that this man is really watching as you allege?"

"I know he is."

"Then we are, indeed, in the toils. Benson has stated that he will put a spy in the house, while here is this fellow to scan our every movement. Encouraging, surely!"

"And how are we to get Lucio Cano out?"

Huntress started nervously.

"Jove! I had not thought of that!" he exclaimed. "This shuts off the hope. Cano is in, and we cannot get him clear without the eyes of this watcher seeing all!"

Master and man looked at each other in silent dismay for some time. It was Boaz who spoke at last.

"Can't we get him off by the rear?"

"Impossible! It is a solid block, and I dare not take any one into my confidence."

"Well, this is tough!"

"Can we do it by stealth, or stratagem?"

"It ain't in my line," admitted Boaz, shaking his head.

Discussion failed to develop anything new, and the general sent Boaz about his business and himself kept up the watch. Before he had been long on duty he made up his mind definitely that his servant's suspicions had not been out of place. He fully decided that the unknown was there as a spy.

"Surely, I must be suspected when such precautions are taken to keep the house under espionage," he murmured. "I had as well surrender at once and be done with it."

The voice of his daughter in the hall reminded him there was some one else to be affected by any revelation he might make. For Ruth's sake he must keep up the battle to the last.

Down the street came a man whose step was firm and full of the emphasis of perfect health and conscious power. Huntress recognized Royal Rock.

"Another inquisitor!" he muttered. "Between him and Benson I must expect this all the time, I suppose."

The detective rung, and Huntress was not surprised when a servant came to announce that he was wanted below. He went down promptly. Royal Rock rose with the politeness so characteristic of him.

"Good-morning, general. I have called to see if there are any new developments."

"None here," Huntress answered, as graciously as he could.

"There are none outside."

"Indeed! Is the thief going to be so hard to catch?"

"As to that I can't say, but I fail to place any known thief who is deserving of what I may call natural suspicion. How about your servants, general?"

"What about them?"

"Are they reliable?"

"Fully!" was the emphatic reply.

"I had thought there might be one deserving of attention."

"Why should you think that?"

"Do you remember that your man, Tucker, called our attention to certain scratches on the basement door, and advanced the opinion that it was through that door the thief gained entrance?"

"Yes."

"He did not enter there."

Huntress felt his hopes weaken once more.

"No?"

"He did not."

"How do you know?"

"The scratches were certainly visible, but they did not tell what they purported to tell. In plain words, I believe they were put there with a motive, and that motive was to put investigators on the wrong track!"

Nathaniel Huntress knew such was the fact, and he had hard work to meet the clear eyes of the detective.

"You amaze me!" he returned.

"I have seen too much of life in my busi-

ness, if I may so express myself without vanity, to be deceived thus. No burglarious instrument would make marks such as were on the door. It was a very clumsy imitation," asserted the Detective Conqueror.

"Is it possible?"

"Possible and true. Let us look for the thief in your own household, general."

There was no accusation, but it seemed as if those keen eyes would burn their way into the general's face, and bring the secret from his guilty mind.

"I cannot accept your view of the case," Huntress declared, with a show of firmness.

"All my people have been with me for a long time. They have won my regard by faithful service, and to doubt them would be cruelly unjust. Character goes a long ways, Mr. Rock, and I believe in them fully."

"In my line of business," calmly announced the detective, "we proceed on the supposition that no one is above suspicion."

"It does not apply to my servants," warmly asserted Huntress, who felt he had one point where he could be set in his belief.

"But let me ask if you have any one person under suspicion?"

"Frankly, I had thought of this Boaz Tucker who was so quick to find the supposed sign on the door."

"A man who has given loyal devotion to the family of which I am now the head—given it all his life, I may say. Besides, he was in bed with another servant at the time of the robbery."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Both men have so assured me."

Royal Rock looked thoughtfully at the floor. What was in his mind the general could not tell, but he did not come to the point as was to be feared, and the soldier gained hope that there was to be a reprieve. Suspicion averted was as good as could be looked for, and he caught at the chance.

At this point there was an invasion of the room. It came in the shape of Mrs. Maude Hollywood. She had developed a fashion of disregarding the commonplace things of life, and was one of the few who dared enter the general's room without knocking. Whether it was her rearing or something else she seemed to feel she was privileged to come and go as suited her will.

She had met Royal Rock the day before, and she now beamed upon him with all the radiance imaginable.

"Senor, I am delighted to see you once more!" she declared. "How delightful it is to have you with us once more! Really, I think you ought to take up your residence here—then I could help you hunt the robbers. We should get along famously, I am sure. General, I have never heard what was stolen. I suppose it was diamonds and silver plate. That is the penalty of being rich. Now, if you were like me, a soldier of fortune—she remembered her assumed role and caught herself abruptly—"by which I mean an aimless wanderer, then you would have nothing to tempt the robber, and your life would go on in endless song amid earth's lamentations, as the poet says. You don't know how delightful it is!"

Maude was capable of talking indefinitely, and neither of them seemed inclined to stop her.

Huntress, however, looked annoyed, while Royal Rock simply watched her with a half-smile and said nothing.

"Deep in your counter-plots," she added. "I wish you would let me in. Do you know, I think plots are delightful; I do, really."

"Can you plot?" Rock asked, carelessly.

"Try me!"

"In what line?"

"Suit yourself as to that."

"Since it is not in my line I shall have to neglect the chance, but I dare say you can find some avenue for your ambition. May I ask if you are a novice?"

"Hardly!"

She looked at General Huntress and was consumed with a desire to say more.

"Inquire of our military friend," she added.

"What does he know of it?"

"Nothing!" asserted Huntress, sharply.

"Do not connect me with any womanish

business like this. Mine has been a busy life, and I have no time for nonsense. Keep to things sensible, if you want me counted in. Mrs. Hollywood," the speaker continued, more cautiously, "is a lady of bounding ambition. She aspires to see the whole world, and eclipse the most noted of explorers by going in more places than any of them has been, if not in doing more wonderful things. A very commendable ambition, but my life has been one where such things went for nothing. Work, work—that has been my guiding star."

He gazed at Maude, imploring her with the glance to corroborate him, but she was willful.

"I am not all snail!" she retorted. "I have the brain and will to do as much as any soldier that ever campaigned on the border."

"Were you ever there?" inquired Rock.

"Was I?"

Maude paused, shrugged her shoulders and laughed.

"The story of my life would be equal to the Arabian Nights," she recklessly asserted.

"Madam, you talk nonsense!" declared the general, sharply. "Mr. Rock is a business man. Leave us to business affairs!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MYSTERY, THE MAN AND THE MAID.

It was not a very kind reminder, but it served the purpose of bringing Maude to her senses. Her spirit of rashness vanished, and she was about to play into the general's hands dutifully when a servant appeared.

The latter put out a card on which was the name of George Benson, with the additional line in writing:

"With the young man spoken of."

Huntress understood who the "young man" was, and he bade them be admitted at once. He would rather have had Royal Rock out of the way, but it did not seem to matter much.

Agent Benson entered. With him was the young man. He was, indeed, young. More than that, he had the marks which go to make up the true West Point graduate. He was as straight as a ramrod, and if not as stiff and awkward, it was because natural grace had in part overcome the training of the great military school.

Benson introduced him in due form.

"Lieutenant John Sheldon!"

Such was the name, and the gaze the general bent upon the new-comer was singularly keen. This man was to come into his household, and custom and prudence required him to accept him as a temporary member of the family, as well.

What was he taking in?

The young officer was not handsome—that was quite clear; but he did not need beauty to fight as a soldier, or to give show of honesty. His was a good face, and he impressed Huntress well as he regarded him. Giving his hand to the lieutenant he observed:

"You are welcome, sir, and I trust we shall be able to make your stay pleasant."

John Sheldon blushed. Possibly it was because he had been addressed so politely by one so high in authority; possibly there was some other reason for the increase of color.

"You are very kind, general," he replied, a little awkwardly.

"I suppose your duties have been explained to you?"

"Yes, sir."

"You are to catch a burglar!"

For a moment the humorous side of the case got the better of the general's worry, and he looked with some disdain upon this stripling. He did not think John Sheldon would ever get the burglar.

"I am to try," amended the lieutenant.

"I accept your modesty. You are to try. Yes, and I dare say you will succeed. We will not let you want for any of the necessities of life, and you may find this better than camp duty. Possibly you will get some amusement out of it."

The young officer moved over by the deepest shadows and thereby concealed a still deeper blush.

Huntress had seen fit to be very kind to a man who was for the time being to have much power in his hands, but he did not over-do the matter. Turning away from him he gave his attention to the visitors who were still more to be feared.

A general discussion followed between himself and Rock and Benson. The latter was in a fever to get the work done, and Huntress was not slow to suspect that the dispatches from Washington had been of a nature to stir the Secret Service agent up to the highest point of action. Still, he noticed that Benson spoke with freedom, which surely would not have been the case had he been deeply in doubt of the general.

"I am still above water," thought the latter. "Let me flounder about bravely while there is any chance for me. Let me die game!"

So he talked with the two men who, had they but known it, had no pressing duty but to ruin him, and as the first effects of his crime wore off he acted with far more of ease.

They did not linger long.

When they were gone he bade Sheldon make himself comfortable, and himself went to a place where he could see the supposed spy across the way. The man not only alarmed but fascinated him. There was the attraction of horror in being watched so uniquely by an unknown foe.

The latter had let the lace curtain fall somewhat around him, but he was visible and on guard. Boaz came to his master's side.

"General," he remarked, "I'd just like to take your sword and go over and fix that fellow. Can't we work it some way?"

"Work it?"

"Kill him!"

"Great heavens! what are you talking about?"

"I wouldn't have done it a few days ago, but," and the old servant lowered his voice to a tragic whisper, "there is now a fever in my veins which bodes no good to the foe. It is in my mind to sweep the whole lot off from the face of the earth. It is, much as I'm surprised at it. I am aware that I have the name of being a peaceable man, but there are times which stir men's souls. This is one of them."

Under less serious circumstances the words of the old man would have been amusing, for he lacked the will to injure anybody, but he believed all he said, now.

Knowing that it meant nothing Huntress did not answer, but for some time he watched the spy across the way.

The general was wise enough to see that many complications might grow out of the watch of this man. Why he was there was by no means certain, but there he was, and it might prove the most serious stumbling-block in the way of the fight he was making in his efforts to save himself from lasting disgrace.

In the meanwhile Lieutenant John Sheldon had gone to the parlor. The invitation to make himself comfortable was rather indefinite, and as the general had not explained where his premises were to be, he had sought the parlor because it was the only place open to him, as far as he could see.

Perhaps the young officer had caught the prevailing nervousness of the household, or perhaps it was something else, but, be that as it might, his manner was peculiar as he sat in the room. At each sound outside which indicated a passing person he started and looked eagerly, but as each went his or her way he grew more grave and less eager.

Finally, some one moved in the hall with steps so light that he failed to hear them at all, and his first warning was when the door opened suddenly and a lady entered.

She started at sight of the officer.

"Excuse me," she spoke; "I was not aware that any one was here."

She was about to withdraw when Sheldon started to his feet.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Huntress," he quickly replied, "but you need not go on my account. Possibly you will recognize a former acquaintance."

He was standing before her in his most impressive attitude, or what he intended for that, but no light of recognition came to her face.

"Had I ought to recognize such an ac-

quaintance?" she asked. "You will please excuse me if I am dull of comprehension."

"My name is Sheldon," he explained, with less of eagerness. "I met you at West Point. Perhaps you will remember—"

She came forward quickly, with outstretched hand, all the graciousness of her manner visible in the act.

"Please pardon me, Lieutenant Sheldon," she requested, kindly. "I must ask excuse from the dim light, and the surprise of the moment, for I did not think to see you."

It was one of the polite fictions of the world, for she had not been troubled by the light. She had simply forgotten the cadet who had paid her devout attention for awhile at West Point, but whom she had scarcely thought of since.

He assured her she was excusable.

"You are very welcome," she added, "and I am glad you called."

"Well, it's hardly a call," he explained, in this straightforward way. "You see, I am the officer on guard here."

"I beg pardon?" she answered.

"Were you not aware that some one had been placed here?" he asked.

"I have had no intimation whatever of it. Placed here? What does that mean?"

"To catch the thief—"

"Ruth's eyes dilated. What was to Sheldon a commonplace matter meant far more to her, and her manner caused his words to die away with the speech but partly made.

"It is on account of the recent robbery," he added, after he could command himself.

"Of course I know nothing, but my superiors have sent me as I said."

"To catch the thief?"

"Such are my orders."

"Do you expect to find him here?"

"It is the chance that he may call again which has made my presence seem desirable."

The lieutenant's candid way, and his manifest desire to make his statement inoffensive recalled Ruth to herself. Without exactly knowing why, she had been shocked at the idea of a man being placed there to catch the thief. Now, seeing that, whatever might be the case elsewhere, Sheldon was honest and sincere, she was recalled to herself and became the strategic woman once more.

Laughing lightly she exclaimed:

"Is it not odd, lieutenant?"

"Odd, Miss Huntress?"

"That we should renew our acquaintance under such peculiar circumstances."

"It is, but, I trust, not disagreeable to you."

The way in which this hope was expressed could not but show Ruth something more than was conveyed in the words. She remembered that the lieutenant had paid her much attention during their brief acquaintance at West Point, and all of his peculiarities made due impression, now. She saw she had a hold on the young man, and it was not with any unworthy motive that she determined not to lose it.

This matter in the house was worrying her, and as the accredited representative of the United States Government, Sheldon was a power, let be over him however many might.

She smiled her sweetest smile.

"I stand a good deal in awe of detectives—"

"I am not that!" he hastened to assert.

"But you are on about that errand."

"Anyhow, I shall not make myself disagreeable."

"I can well believe it. I was only jesting in speaking of you in such a way," and Ruth fairly dazzled Sheldon with her smile and her graciousness.

"Of course I am a mere figure-head here. It is absurd to suppose the thief will come again."

"Be that as it may, you are our guest, and we shall not be blind to the fact. I shall be glad to renew the acquaintance of the past spring, and I am sure my brother and father will welcome you to the circle of their friends."

John Sheldon drew a quick, sharp breath. At that moment he accounted himself the luckiest man in the world. Who would not, with Ruth smiling upon him?

CHAPTER IX.

THE NIGHT ENCOUNTER.

WHEN Ruth went up-stairs, somewhat later, she met her father in the upper hall. The expression in his face which worried her seemed to grow upon him, and she now exclaimed:

"Father, I am going to turn despot and order you about with military imperiousness. It is my will that you retire and get due rest. If ever a man needed it you do. You alarm me—you don't look well."

"My dear, will you kindly refrain from commenting upon the fact?" courteously asked the general. "I am not myself, and things worry me, but let it pass. Have you," he abruptly added, "seen the strippling whom the Government spies have placed in our household?"

"Lieutenant Sheldon?"

"Yes."

"Yes, sir; I have seen him."

"Is it not an enviable condition of affairs when a spy is thus placed in one's house?" bitterly demanded Huntress.

"Is he likely to worry us?"

"How can it be otherwise?"

"Easily, I think," Ruth answered. "I met this gentleman at West Point, last spring, and he seems to desire my friendship. If I give it, he surely will not act an unmanly part."

There was a significance in her manner which the general could not fail to notice. He regarded her closely.

"Have you really influence with the young man?" he asked.

"I infer that I have."

"Then pray use it to—to—"

Huntress stumbled over his speech, but finally managed to finish after a fashion:

"So he may make himself as little obnoxious to us as possible."

"You can rely on me to do so."

Ruth studied her father's face anxiously; then added:

"Is there more I can do for you?"

"I think not, my dear."

"Remember you have said I am a born diplomatist," she reminded, her air of lightness but partially concealing deeper thoughts. "Somebody, or several somebodies, have given woman credit for wit and ingenuity. Perhaps I really have some of it. If I can help you, you know how gladly I would do it."

"I do, Ruth; I do, and if I see how you can be of service I will call on you. Perhaps I may, yet."

It was seriously said. Huntress felt a strong desire to have some one share his secret who could give him real sympathy, who would be a safe ally, and to whom he could pour out the burden of his weary heart. He had confided in Ruth in the past, and he would have done so again had he not felt it was a guilty secret he held, and one which would so lower him in her opinion.

The interview was not prolonged, but her sympathetic regard haunted him.

"I may yet tell her all," he thought.

The day passed without any serious break. There was always something to keep Huntress on the defensive. John Sheldon was around, and though he was the most unobtrusive of guests, his presence annoyed the general. Then there was Maude Hollywood, who could not curtail her desire to be prominent in all things, and she kept him in dread lest she should make some break which would let too much be known.

Boaz Tucker went out during the day. He went to where they had hoped to find a refuge for Lucio Cano, but the man to whom they designed making application was not at home, and would not be until the following day.

Thus, the refugee's departure was unavoidably deferred until the passage of another night.

Of course when he did go it must not be by the front door—that was impossible with the spy across the way always on the watch, as he seemed to be—but they hoped to get Lucio out by the rear, somehow—how, they did not yet know.

Ruth retired at the usual hour, when night came, but not to sleep as was her custom. Hour by hour the impression grew upon her that serious trouble menaced the once-happy family. Accustomed to reading Nathaniel

Huntress well she could see he was not himself. Indeed, he was so far from it, and his perturbation was of such unusual quality that she could not understand it, and had only one clear idea—that he was in distress of mind which should, and did, arouse all her loving sympathy.

She lay and thought of this for a long time, and when she fell asleep it was not a deep or regular slumber.

After awhile she became fully awake, and with the condition came a nervousness unusual to her. Imaginings of vague but painful nature so beset her that she at last rose and donned a wrapper and passed out into the hall. The whole house seemed quiet, and she experienced some relief, but determined to make a tour of the whole premises before returning.

Going on she descended to the basement without adventure, and then turned back.

On the floor from which she started, and near her own room, she suddenly came face to face with a man. The gas was burning dimly, and the light was enough to give her a favorable view. She perceived that the other wanderer was a stranger to her.

He had come to a full stop, and they gazed at each other in silent outward apathy for several moments. Then Ruth recovered from her surprise. Believing she had discovered a burglar she spoke in a firm voice:

"Do not try to escape. It will do you no good. Surrender!"

"I want to see the Senor General," meekly replied the wanderer.

"You take a strange hour to make a call."

"I am ill."

"This is no hospital."

"But the general will do something for me."

"He will, surely, and so will I. We will help you to find the police station."

"Mercy, good lady; mercy!" cried the man, putting out his hands beseechingly. "I did not leave my hiding-place without good cause. I am sorely ill, I do assure you."

"What hiding-place?"

"The general put me up-stairs—"

"We will see whether he did or not."

Ruth spoke with decision. She had been somewhat shaken in her first belief that she had found a burglar by the meek air of the unknown, and as she reasoned more carefully she was impressed with the fact that he had the look and manner of a Mexican.

He might be telling the truth, after all, though she could not understand his remarkable assertion that he had been concealed in the house.

The best way to settle it was to see the general, and she gave an order in a voice worthy of a soldier's daughter.

"Go down-stairs, but be careful how you attempt to escape or act with violence."

The man sighed deeply.

"I will do nothing," he assured.

"Go on!"

He went.

"Who are you?" Ruth asked, curiously.

"I refer you to the general," cautiously answered her companion.

Ruth let it rest at that, but as they moved down the stairs her wonder increased. If he told the truth, what new mystery had she chanced upon? If he had been within their premises known to her father, what did it mean?

She did not like to speculate on the solution of the secret, much as she was resolved to settle it.

On reaching the door of the general's room a light was to be seen shining through the crack under it, and this proof of his probable wakefulness encouraged her to knock. Huntress answered readily, and then stood surprised and shocked at sight of the singular view accorded him.

His plan of keeping Lucio Cano out of sight had miscarried so soon, for the night-wanderer was the Mexican.

"Father," said Ruth, "here is a man I have found in the house. He claims to be here with your knowledge, and I wish to know how it is."

"Yes, senor, and I wish for medicine," added Lucio, with painful disregard for the seriousness of the occasion.

"Do you really know him?" continued Ruth.

"I—I think I have seen him," admitted Huntress.

"Did you know he was here?"

"Surely the good general knew!" declared Lucio, with sudden fear he was to be denied.

"Yes," muttered Huntress.

"You knew of him?"

"I did."

"And that he was in the house?"

"Yes."

The general saw the look of increasing wonder on his daughter's face, and he rallied.

"Senor Cano is known to me, Ruth, and I secreted him here. There are reasons why he did not wish his presence known to any one else, so we made it a private affair, all through."

"Where in the world has he been?" and Ruth's wonder broke out afresh. "I thought I had been over the whole house in my capacity as manager, but this is my first sight of him."

"When one hides it must be thoroughly. I dare say you have not been in the trunk-room of late. Come in, both of you. Do not wonder at all this, Ruth, for we have to do many singular things in this life-battle of ours, be we carpenters, merchants or soldiers. Yes; I secreted Senor Cano until he could safely go elsewhere. He is—a Mexican refugee."

Nathaniel Huntress looked at the floor, and Ruth knew there was more in the admission than was told. Among other things she knew he was an unwelcome guest at their residence, and all this brought fresh misgivings to her mind.

What would come next?

Her anxious gaze sought his face pertinaciously, but Lucio broke the pause and ruined a dramatic crisis with a matter-of-fact remark.

"I am sick, sick!" he declared, plaintively.

"Senor General, give me medicine for my ills."

Huntress turned to his daughter.

"Ruth, your prudence in making sure all was right is very commendable, but we shall need you no longer. Go to your couch, child, and do not let us rob you of more sleep. I will soon cure this gentleman, and then I, too, will sleep."

She understood the meaning of the addition, but was not deceived by it. If he had been in mood for slumber he would not have been up and dressed at that hour.

His will was her law, however, and she moved toward the door. He took her hand and escorted her with formal politeness.

"I will explain this later," he remarked.

"You can retire with the assurance that all is well."

Ruth went up-stairs and retired, but not with the belief that all was well.

"There is something to this which I cannot understand," she murmured. "Why should he secrete a Mexican refugee? I do not like the looks of the man. He is more like a hunted dog than a man of uprightness. Even if he was the latter, why should my father secrete a Mexican refugee here?"

It was something past her comprehension, but she could not dismiss it from her mind. Events were following fast, and all pointed to one end—to trouble.

It was long before she fell asleep, and her pillow was not a peaceful one the rest of the night.

CHAPTER X.

STARTLING NEWS FOR RUTH.

THE next morning the Huntress family met at the table as usual. Maude Hollywood was gay and at ease; Ralph sent inquisitive glances toward her relatives, but helped Maude on with the conversation; Ruth was self-possessed but ill at ease; while the general made but little attempt to take part in the conversation.

No one achieved success unless it was the voluble adventuress.

After breakfast Ruth gave her father abundant chance to refer to the affair of the night, but he did not do so. He avoided the matter entirely. The refugee was not to be seen, but Ruth thought of the trunk-room and imagined the unknown in hiding there.

He had grown far more interesting to her than he ever would have been under other circumstances. Much she wondered who and what he was. Why he was hiding, any-

how? The loyalist party of Mexico had triumphed—the party of which the general was supposed to be a sympathizer—so why need this man be in hiding?

She saw but one way to answer the question, and possibilities were suggested which worried her.

Maude Hollywood was not worried. She went out for an airing, as she expressed it, and was gone several hours. At lunch she was not so voluble as she had been, and the periods of thought into which she fell occasionally were decidedly serious of nature.

Shortly after the meal was finished Agent Benson called. He was alone with the general for a long time, after which he went out and closed the door after him with more force than seemed necessary. Still later a servant came to Ruth and said:

"General Huntress would like to see you in his room, miss."

Ruth went. She did not know what to expect, but she was strong in the belief that events were reaching some sort of crisis, and this might herald the beginning of the end.

When she entered Nathaniel Huntress was seated at his desk. First view of his face led the girl to alter her belief and think the call did not portend anything serious. He had not looked so composed and firm for some time.

He motioned to a seat.

"Please be at your ease, my dear," he requested.

She sat down, but he remained silent for some time before breaking in upon her thoughts. She waited patiently, and was at last rewarded.

"I am aware," he began, "that certain occurrences have of late excited your wonder. You inferred they meant more than passing importance. In this you were right, but just how much they meant even you did not suspect."

His voice was firm, yet there was that in the speech, labored and ominous, which made her dread the finishing touch. She did not interrupt, and he soon went on. Raising his eyes he looked her fully in the face.

"You have supposed me an honorable man?" he questioned.

"I never doubted it, sir."

"What would you say if you were brought to doubt?"

"That I cannot be!" she declared, firmly.

"Are you sure?"

"I am!"

"Confidence is often misplaced, and love and ties of relationship are no proof of honor. I should be glad to have you continue in your way of thinking, but it is impossible."

"You talk in riddles."

Ruth moved uneasily. What, indeed, did all this presage? She knew not, but he had succeeded in making her feel most thoroughly ill at ease.

"I will be plain. When I was on the border I left you in Washington. You have not known what occurred on the frontier, but the time has come for you to learn."

Becoming silent he looked downward for several seconds and then lifted his head with a motion in which defiance and false pride were strongly mingled.

"I went to my post on the frontier with a spotless record and a determination to do my duty as usual. No: I will not say I had such a determination, for in my long career in the service of the Government I had never done otherwise, and the thought of doing so, or that I need bolster up my loyalty, never occurred to me."

"The chief duty of my command was to see that the rival factions of the Mexican army did not forget where the boundary line between the two countries was, and carry their raids, retreats and general work to United States soil."

"Situating thus I was often brought in contact with the rival parties, the leaders of each frequently coming to my camp. They talked to me freely, and I came to know the ins and outs of each fully."

"It was my misfortune that my sympathies were aroused for the insurgents. They had suffered something in the way of injustice, surely, and in a land of revolutions they thought they had a right to rebel."

"Unfortunately, they convinced me, too."

"It is humiliating to confess it, but when the insurgent leaders discovered they had

sympathy they sought to corrupt my honor—and succeeded.

"They besought me to be ever-vigilant against the loyal troops, but to give themselves extra show to do their work, and to avoid pursuit by the rival faction. As my reward they offered me the free gift of a large, rich tract of land in Mexico in case of their success.

"I could not excuse myself if I would. My duty was plain, and nothing should have relieved me from it. Unfortunately, I was tempted and I fell. Honor should have kept me from accepting the bribe. It did not, and honor was lost."

Briefly the narrator paused. Ruth regarded him with dilated eyes. What was coming next? She dared not think—she could only hang feverishly on his words.

"I did help them; I was blind to the encroachments of the one, and very keen to see those of the other party. I did all I could in safety to aid the side which had bribed me.

"Letters passed between me and both factions, but the contents differed vastly. To the one I was a cold official; to the other, a sympathizing friend, bribe-bought.

"All this seemed safe, just then. The insurgents were enjoying a wave of luck—all they ever had. I was rash, and wrote as frankly as a boy, I fear. Worse still, my bias so entered into official documents—not those I was daily sending to my own Government, but those I must send sooner or later—that my bent was to be plainly seen there.

"Time went on, and I dreamed of my vast Mexican possessions. I had definite plans in regard to them, which I need not mention, since the plans died with the cause of the rebels.

"When the latter did go down it was a terrible awakening to me. Misfortunes came upon them swiftly when they once began, and I was so convinced of their speedy downfall that I applied for and received leave of absence under plea of illness. The plea was true.

"With the fall of the insurgents must come disgrace to me—I saw there was no way to avoid it. The knowledge made me really ill. No longer young I was unable to bear the trouble as I should once.

"Clearly enough I saw there was no hope for me. If I succeeded in escaping betrayal at the hands of the doomed insurgents I could not escape other perils. The official documents in the case would tell enough to ruin me.

"Leave of absence was granted to me and I came on to Washington. I went there with the fixed determination to tell all and let my superiors see that, instead of obeying orders and being a neutral general, as I should, I had been untrue to my trust.

"I did not know then, and I do not now, just how severely my crime would have been regarded, but this much is sure—I should have been disgraced and dismissed from the army. Why I know this need not be told in full now.

"Once in Washington my courage wavered and, instead of handing over all my papers I cowardly held back a part, and these I brought with me to New York. I knew they would be missed, and I waited for the fatal revelation. It came at last; my superiors knew I had kept something back.

"When I was informed that Benson would call here to get what was missing I acted the coward again. The robbery here was a lie, as told. I called Boaz Tucker into my confidence, and he took the papers from my hand and spirited them away. It was his wish to destroy them, but I said no, and I suppose they still exist.

"Now you know all about the 'robbery.' You know, too, all about my disgrace.

"We have in our house, now, two reminders of the border trouble. Lucio Cano is a Mexican refugee who is in fear of his life at the hands of those he has turned against, while Maude Hollywood, instead of being an innocent American traveler, is a mixed-blood adventuress who whiffled around as the tide of success flowed, always trying to be on the right, the winning side.

"My own crimes have compelled me to shelter these people, though they are a constant menace to me.

"The end is near, however. Benson has

just been to me and asked certain questions about Maude Hollywood which are alarming, when we consider what she is. She is wanted in Mexico, and the Government has only to learn of her to surrender her, for she is a citizen of that country.

"Her arrest would bring matters to an end; I cannot hope to hide the truth longer. Even if she kept silent, which she is not likely to do when hard pressed, my connection with her scheme would soon be known.

"Such is the situation now. I am disgraced by my own acts; the disgrace will soon be public, and there is no longer any way to stave off the revelation."

Nathaniel Huntress ceased.

Toward the last his unnatural composure vanished and his voice trembled, but there was still much of defiance in his manner. Thus would he face his accusers when the last act came; his pride would not bend. Honor was gone, but he would not let the world see him act the craven.

Ruth drew a deep, quick breath. The secret was known, at last, and, after listening with her whole life bound up in the revelation, as it were, she awoke from the trance of consternation with a nervous start.

Her lips moved to make reply, but no words came from them, however.

Huntress regarded her closely and then added:

"So begins my penance."

"But you have done nothing to deserve this!" cried Ruth, quickly.

"Nothing?"

"What did it matter if your sympathies were with the insurgents?"

"Ah! but it matters that I was guilty of treason."

"What did you do? How could you act the part of treason when our country had no part in the fight?"

"I had explicit orders, and they were to give no help to the rebels. Really, I did not betray or, in one sense, injure our own country, but I disobeyed orders. You know what that is to a soldier."

"The penalty—"

"Might be death, at times, but under existing circumstances it probably would be no more—mark the terms!—no more than dishonorable dismissal from the army and the contempt of all."

"You meant no harm."

"I did harm."

"And the authorities at the capital will—"

"Proceed to the utmost against me. I feel sure Benson already suspects. I can read it in his eyes and face. He represents the Government, and he will have no mercy. The blow must fall!"

CHAPTER XI.

DANGER!

GENERAL HUNTRESS was firm of voice. He had all this while hid his secret wholly from all except for the little he had told to Boaz Tucker. Now, for the first time, he was experiencing the pleasure, the limitless relief of one who reveals his burden to another. Relief beyond description, but long delayed by those of secretive nature, and, in their case, all the more valuable when secured.

The general felt he had laid the foundation for disgust and loathing in his daughter's mind, yet he was happier than he had been for a long time.

The dreaded emotions were not pictured in Ruth's face, and they were not in her mind. On the contrary, she felt only the liveliest sympathy and deepest regret for him.

Gradually, however, these feelings had been giving place to something more practical, and she now broke forth:

"What are you going to do?"

Huntress shrugged his shoulders.

"Succumb!" he tersely replied.

"Give up?"

"Yes."

"Never, never!" she exclaimed. "We will not do that; we will not! We will fight to the end!"

"What can we do?"

"They have no proof yet?"

"I think not, though Benson suspects—"

"Are you sure?"

"No; but I think so."

"That is not proof for him, and even if he does suspect, he has yet to prove anything. I think his manner is not that of a person who has solved a mystery. While there is life there is hope. Let us fight to the end!"

Her courageous manner could not but have effect on the soldier, who brightened a little.

"All we can do is to keep them off."

"Isn't it much?"

"For a time it may be."

"Let it suffice while it lasts. Our worst enemies are Benson and Royal Rock, are they not?"

"Yes, though John Sheldon—"

"Leave him to me!"

Ruth beat a restless tattoo on the floor with her foot. Her cheeks had flushed, and the light in her eyes was a revelation. She had longed to aid her father. The chance had come, or she was but a poor observer. She intended to seize upon it.

Huntress shook his head.

"It seems a useless battle to me."

"The point is to ward off danger from these men we have in our camp, as I may say. The President of these United States is not going to come here to look into the matter. We have Royal Rock, Benson and Sheldon to fear. To fear? Nonsense! I mean to defeat! Yes, and we'll do it!"

"How?"

"I don't know yet; we must depend upon their own movements and circumstances to show us the way."

It was confidently said, but General Huntress was too old in years to wax sanguine without visible means of hope. He saw no way to accomplish this desired result.

Father and daughter discussed the matter further. Ruth plainly saw what a menace Lucio Cano and Maude Hollywood were to their prospects, but, like Huntress, she saw no way of getting rid of them. Certainly, the general assured her, Cano was then too ill to leave—too ill even to leave the recess where he had his quarters upstairs.

Nothing was to be feared from Maude if she kept her senses about her, but she was as rattle-pated as one could well be, and though she had quite a reputation as a skillful schemer in the ranks of revolutionists, she was not a desirable companion in an emergency.

Still, the general said he dared not send her away, so that was settled.

"You can see to her," added Ruth. "I resign all control over her. As for the men, leave them to me. I must be more with you. Not that I would commit the egregious folly of being present at your private interviews, but you must take me as your clerk, so to speak. Your health makes it necessary to have me in that capacity. Do you see?"

"Yes."

"Then let us hope."

"We will."

But Huntress sighed when he said it. It was not a sanguine pledge. True, he had paid Ruth the compliment of being a born statesman many times in the past, but there were occasions when even a diplomatist was helpless, and he believed this to be one of them.

When she had gone over the case more fully he suddenly thought of another thing.

"I did not expect you to take such an interest in this affair," he remarked.

"You did not? Why?"

"I thought that after all you have heard told you you would despise me too much to sympathize with me in my trials."

Wide opened Ruth's eyes.

"Despise you?" she echoed.

"Yes."

"Why should I?"

"The story of my shame—"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"Call it not that. Possibly you erred—I know not how that may be—but it was not willfully. There is not room in your heart for one evil thought or wish."

"The world will not say that."

"I care not for the world. It is always bitter and unjust, and he who heeds it is foolish. Let us not think of it. Even if the world has cause to be so harsh, which it has not, it would not matter to me. Why should it? You and I know each other, and we can afford to rely one upon the other and close

our eyes and ears to all others. I know you; I know your honor and true worth, and nothing will make me waver. Rest assured I have nothing but deep pity and respect for you, my father!"

Huntress pressed her hand, too much moved to speak for many moments. His eyes were dimmed with tears, and the soldier had given place to the father. At last he murmured:

"God bless you, child; may God bless you!"

When she left the room he was in a mood somewhat more hopeful, though it was founded on sympathy rather than any visible means of expectation. The danger was not less pressing, nor was there any way of escape to be seen.

Again the hours dragged on, no outward change occurring, though a constant observer, had there been such, would have seen that Ruth was much with young Lieutenant Sheldon. One person did see a part of this. It was Maude, and she expressed her sentiments to Ruth at the first opportunity.

"Miss Huntress, you have made a conquest!" she abruptly announced.

"A conquest? Excuse me; I do not know what you mean."

Innocent enough was the general's daughter in the answer—at least, she seemed so, but diplomatic young women are not always to be relied upon to make all their thoughts known.

"Ask Sheldon!" laughed Maude.

"Since it is your statement, perhaps you can tell better than he what you do mean. That is, if you wish to do so."

Ruth was indifferent, but her companion was not to be discouraged.

"Possibly I can make myself understood," admitted Maude. "Plain English goes a long way in an explanation. The gallant West Pointer is in love!"

"I have noticed his fancy for you—"

"For me? Great heavens! is that all you have noticed? Your eyes must be strabismus afflicted. What you have seen I have not observed, but the young man's malady is very plain to me. Divine Ruth, he worships you!"

"Nonsense!"

"Ask him!"

"Pardon me, I think I will refrain. I have other things to occupy my attention."

"Let us not parry, thrust and fence like two swordsmen in deadly combat. I do not seek to pry into your private affairs; I care not how you regard the West Pointer. The only thing I had in mind was that his heart had been riven by the lightning of your glance—a very serious difficulty for a youth to have to contend with. My dear, let me congratulate you. Whether you see fit to consider his love worth receiving seriously or not you have scored a victory, and, since he is an honest man, you are to be congratulated. The love of an honest man is an honor to whomsoever receives it."

"Mrs. Hollywood, you take much for granted."

"Nothing!"

"Opinions differ."

"Mine and Sheldon's do not."

Ruth shrugged her shoulders and was silent.

"Let us drop the subject," amiably added the elder lady. "I only mentioned it casually. One can't help seeing such things, and to one who is past the flush of youth the workings of the human heart are of real scientific interest—no more. Suppose we consider Sheldon as an agent. He makes a safe one. He would not find a mountain if it was crushing his foot."

"You do not give him credit for much ability of mind—"

"As he is now I do not. Mind gives way and reason deserts its throne when the heart gets affected. Sheldon sees only the light of his life. Good! we like such a watcher!"

Maude was airy and at ease. Ruth watched her sharply. She did not especially fancy this woman. Maude might be safe and reliable, but she knew too much. As a chance traveler on the border she had been but a feather in the scale, but as a political plotter she was very different. Was she safe?—was she loyal?

If she aspired to get into Ruth's confidence she was baffled by the skill of the general's daughter. Giving no clue to her thoughts

the latter evaded all attempts to get her thoughts into words, if such a purpose there was.

The interview ended, and Ruth went to her own room to think.

Nathaniel Huntress was in a state of mind when he needed help if he ever had. What could she do for him?

At present she did not see much, but the passage of time was sure to make opportunities. Would she be able to seize upon them? No plans could be laid; she must await the coming events and do what she could when the chance was offered.

Anon she went to the balcony which was outside her father's room. While there she heard the bell ring, but gave the fact no attention until voices sounded in the room beyond.

"George Benson!" she murmured, with a start.

CHAPTER XII.

A NEW CALAMITY.

THE Government agent evidently was in haste to come to business.

"General," he exclaimed, "I have made a discovery."

"Have you?"

Huntress's voice sounded quietly, as if he was not troubled by the prospect of hearing what the discovery was, but Ruth pressed her hand to her heart and listened with anxious attention.

"What do you know about the woman you are sheltering here?—I refer to Mrs. Hollywood," explained Benson.

"What do I know of her?" Huntress repeated, slowly.

"Yes."

"Why, she was sojourning on the border—"

"In what capacity?"

"As a traveler, she said."

"She said so. Ah! And did she convince you?"

"There was nothing to be convinced of; she and her purpose did not concern me."

The soldier made the assertion readily, but it did not stay the tide of Benson's eloquence.

"If you think it did not concern you, you labor under a vast mistake. Can it be you were so blind to her real character?"

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that Maude Hollywood is a political adventuress. She has an American name, but her mother was of Mexican extraction, and the daughter is all Mexican at heart. More than that, she is as enthusiastic a schemer as the land of revolutions ever produced, and she makes it her trade to take part in them. A fixed government is as obnoxious to her as the small-pox. In the last insurrection she was on the wrong side, as usual, and was a bitter enemy of the Government until she saw which the winner was to be. Then she whiffed around. Her deeds are known to some, however, and they only desire a little more proof to put her under the ban."

"This is extraordinary!" Huntress exclaimed.

"You did not know of it, then?"

"What means had I? She posed as a simple traveler—"

"You see the situation now?"

"What is it?"

"Where are your stolen papers?"

"I know not."

"Who stole them?"

"Maude Hollywood was not in the house."

"Are you so blind as not to be able to read between the lines? She did her work before coming. Whether she was the thief, herself, I can't say, but certain it is she had a hand in the game—ay, it was she who inspired the theft, and it may have been she who took the papers. All is clear."

Ruth wished she was in the room, and had a strong temptation to enter. As far as she could tell her father was bearing up well, but she feared the strain might be too much for him. His next words reassured her greatly. He answered in a steady voice:

"Mrs. Hollywood is my guest, and though she may be all you allege, I am not disposed to condemn her unheard. What is your proof?"

"I have none at present, but hope to acquire it ere long. I have my news from men

who claim to know her. I am going to sift the evidence carefully, and see what is in it."

"What does Royal Rock say about it?"

"He knows nothing, and I shall not tell him until to-morrow. I wish to be sure before I put anything before such a foxy fellow as he is reputed to be."

Huntress was silent.

"Do you see your duty, general?" Benson added, presently.

"What do you mean?"

"You should move to have the woman arrested."

"I?"

"Yes."

Ruth could imagine how the proposition impressed her father. He was utterly in Maude's power. He might as well apply a train of fire to a powder magazine as to anger her. They had plotted together, and what one was guilty of so was the other. Let her confess, and not only would the blow fall on him, but it would fall far more heavily than on her.

She had but little to lose; he had honor and all else.

"If I see my duty, it is not in that line," the general replied. "While she is my guest I can do nothing not in keeping with the duty I owe a guest. Arrest her? For what? We are not in Mexico, now."

"Suppose she plotted against our Government, too?"

"How could she? What effect had that miserable little revolution on the affairs of our big country?"

"Do you forget what may be the result of intrigue? How many wars have been brought about by such things? How do we know to what extent this woman may not have compromised our own country? The war in the sister republic is but just over. What will the harvesting of the full evidence show?"

Ruth breathed heavily. Gladly would she have seen her father's face, then. Benson was getting too near the truth to be agreeable. How would the general stand it?

His reply was firmer than she had dared to hope.

"I think your imagination runs riot with you, Benson," replied Huntress. "Until I have due proof I shall not believe any part of the tale you have told—"

"Are you infatuated with that woman?" sharply demanded Benson.

"Sir?"

"A soldier should not be blind."

"Nor should he be unjust."

"Then you will not proceed against her?"

"Not until I am sure such a step would be right."

"You may be sorry for this."

"Sorry?"

"So I said!"

"And what do you mean?"

"After what has occurred you should be eager to regain the confidence you have lost with the so-called stolen papers, instead of—"

"So-called stolen papers, did you say, sir?"

The conversation was getting on delicate ground. Benson, annoyed by the opposition, was warmer in his remarks than he need to have been, and the last words from Huntress were suggestive of trouble to come.

"Well, the papers disappeared," added Benson.

"So-called stolen papers," repeated the general, with deliberate utterance.

"Do not misunderstand me, sir. I was trying to draw a distinction between the work of an ordinary thief and the possible purloining of a designing woman."

It was a falsehood, but the agent thought it best to be a little careful. He was a zealous man, and eager to win renown, but with all the ideas he held that Huntress had neglected his duty seriously he did not quite dare to anger him to an extreme.

The impending quarrel was stifled, but Benson did not recede from his purpose. In a quiet way he still maintained that Mrs. Hollywood ought to be taken into camp, as he expressed it, and Huntress was equally firm in declaring he would have proof before offending a guest.

The result of this was that the agent waxed warm again, and ended by declaring

he would see to her, himself, and with this assertion he left the house more abruptly than there seemed to be any need of doing.

Ruth entered her father's room by the low window. He had rested his elbows on the table and his head on his hands, and looked the picture of discouragement.

She put her arm around his neck.

He started up nervously, and then smiled faintly when he saw who it was.

"Did I startle you?" she asked.

"You did, indeed."

"You looked so downcast—"

"Benson has been here."

"I know, and I heard all from the balcony. Don't blame me for acting the listener, for I should not have done it had I thought there was anything you would object to having me hear."

"Most certainly I do not blame you; I am glad you did hear all. You see," the general wearily added, "the fellow is on the track."

"Of Maude Hollywood."

"She and I fall together. She would doubtless betray me if caught in the toils, herself."

"I am not so sure of that."

"In any case, he is on the track, and he is likely to learn more. If she is detected fully the knowledge will be sufficient to overwhelm me, too."

"What can you do?"

"True! What?"

"We cannot deceive Benson."

"Hardly! He has got information too direct, it seems."

Father and daughter meditated. They had feared Royal Rock most of all, but it was now Benson who menaced their well-being. What way out of it was presented to them? And the mind of each gave the answer:

None!

They talked for some time, but without gaining light. The decision to delay and hope on was all that could be done then. Before the interview ended Boaz Tucker made his appearance. Being asked what his business was he looked at Ruth and hesitated, but Huntress spoke promptly:

"I have no secrets from my daughter. You can talk freely—"

"But this is about—"

"About what?"

Boaz shook his head doubtfully and hesitated still further before his reluctant tongue found speech.

"Well, about the man we know of up there."

He pointed indefinitely, but the general understood.

"Lucio Cano?"

"Yes, sir."

"What of him?"

"His sickness grows upon him and he ain't able to leave his den. You see what that means."

"That he can't go out of the house, no matter how well we may fix things."

With another doubtful glance at Ruth the servant assented.

"We shall have to make the best of it. I'll see him and doctor him further. Not able to leave his room, eh?"

"That's it. He says he can't sit up."

"Then we have a genuine sick man on our hands. I'll go there immediately."

He carried out this plan. He had feared that Cano might be in a fever, but examination made him hope there was no danger of it. He prescribed for him the best he could, and then returned to Ruth. The plan to wait until the events of the next day were seen was about all they could do, and this line of action was adopted. To Ruth it was a disappointment of no mean nature. She had been longing to do something for her father, but in a crisis of this kind she seemed to be helpless.

That night the family retired without any thought of the changes the night would bring forth. The evening was not different from any, its most noticeable feature being a flirtation by Ralph and Maude, which both understood to be a good joke and laughed at accordingly.

A pleasant evening, an outsider would have said, looking only at the surface.

But the demon of trouble was there, and his forces were gathering anew.

The next morning Ruth was awakened

by unusual sounds in the hall—the hushed whisper which tells of something which cannot, in the opinion of those who speak, be said aloud.

Anxious for her father she arose, threw on a wrapper and looked out. Two female servants were there. Looking pale and scared.

"What is wrong?" Ruth asked, quickly.

"Oh! miss," cried one, "it is something dreadful!"

"The general—is he ill?"

"No, but there is a man in the yard—"

The speaker paused and said no more.

"A man? What of him?"

"He is dead!"

"Dead!" Ruth echoed.

"Yes, and it is George Benson!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MYSTERY OF THE DEAD.

RUTH stood dumb with dismay.

"Yes," added the second servant, "and it's murder, too!"

"Mr. Benson has been killed!"

"We found him there when we looked out."

"Every one is wondering how he came there."

"Nobody knows of his having been in the house when we went to bed!"

The voices struck on Ruth's ears like a far away dialogue. The shock had been too much for her fully to understand what all this meant, but the feeling gradually wore off and she began to think for herself.

"George Benson dead in our yard!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, miss."

"But how—when—"

"We don't know anything about it; nobody does; but it is dreadful, and it has upset us all—"

"Be calm! What was he doing in the yard?"

"Just what we cannot think of. It was the back-yard, and how did he get there? Somebody killed him, but who?"

Ruth, herself, wondered who, and she wondered with a sickening feeling of dread. There was no way for the agent to get into the rear yard without passing through the Huntress house, or some other house on the block, and it was something she could not understand. She wasted no more time in talking with the servants, but withdrew and hurriedly began to dress.

When it was finished she went down the stairs.

In the lower hall she met Ralph. He had been passing along hurriedly, but paused at sight of her. One look at her face was enough to answer a natural question before it was asked.

"You have heard the news?" he exclaimed.

"Benson—"

"Is dead!"

"And in our yard?"

"Yes."

"How came he there?"

"It is a mystery not yet solved. He was not seen near the house after dark, and how he could get to the area of yards is puzzling. At present no building is going on, and the interior of the block is all inclosed. To enter he must have made use of some house, ours or some other one."

"Are you sure he was not here after dark?"

"He did not visit father, and why should he visit any one else? To reply more directly, I will say the servants have been questioned carefully, and nobody saw him here."

"Was he—"

Ruth could not frame the question, but Ralph understood.

"He seems to have been murdered."

"Just heaven!"

Ruth breathed the words, and she trembled pitifully. She saw how this fresh tragedy would complicate matters, and what difficulties were liable to rise from it for them. With the investigation under way which the detective had been pursuing the voice of the suspicious and the censorious would have ample room to condemn and slur those who had the most at stake.

Ralph regarded her closely for a moment and then directed:

"Return to your room, Ruth. You can do no good here, and it is a trying position even for those of masculine nerves. Do not make food for haunting memories by going to such a place unnecessarily."

"Who is—out there?"

"No one but our own people, thus far. Royal Rock has been sent for and is momentarily expected. Of course we have sent word to the regular police, too. Ah! there is a ring at the bell. Some one has come. Go back, Ruth; go back!"

It was good advice, and the general's daughter did not refuse to accept it. She returned to the seclusion of her own chamber. There she stood in a position statue-like and yet intense, thinking with keenness of attention on the new event.

"What could he have been doing here? And who would harm him?"

It was a great question. Who had any motive for doing him harm? She hated herself for the mute interrogation, for it brought back the occurrences of the previous day. But there was a thrill of hope.

"If he did not tell what he had learned in regard to Maude Hollywood the secret has died with him. Died, and by whose efforts?"

There was so much that was suggestive in the question that she shivered and was glad to give it a rest. Gladly, too, would she have banished the whole matter in the same way, but it was something which would not down.

In the mean while the person who had rung the bell had been admitted. It was Royal Rock. Ralph met him near the door.

"I have received your summons," observed the detective. "Is there anything new?"

"Unfortunately, there is. Have you had no clue to the new occurrence?"

"None whatever."

"George Benson is dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. He was found in our back-yard, this morning, in that deplorable condition—an occurrence which gives us the deepest grief and amazement. Come and see for yourself."

Schooled as Royal Rock was in hiding his emotions he had betrayed surprise on hearing this news, but the weakness soon passed. He was his old, cool self as he followed Ralph to the yard, where the body still lay. The general's son had not mentioned to the detective what he had told so freely to his sister, but he knew the discovery must follow.

Benson had been murdered, and the fact could not be disguised.

The body had been covered by a cloth. It lay close to the house, and even the movements of those around it had by some good fortune thus far escaped notice from the neighbors.

Thus, no prying outsiders were yet observers.

Royal Rock went about his work systematically. Bending over the dead man he looked for the cause of death. A wound on the scalp directed his attention, and a touch of his hand told the rest. It had been a blow on the head dealt by a hand which wielded some deadly weapon, and it was this which had deprived the agent of life.

"How did this happen?" Rock asked, quietly.

"We only know that the body was found by us in the back-yard, as you see it, this morning," Ralph replied, for his father.

"Was he stopping with you?"

"No. He called here during the day, but went away, and nobody of us saw him any more. How he came where you see him we cannot imagine."

Rock glanced around the area inclosed by the houses of the block. Seeing no opening headed:

"He must have passed through by some house."

"It does look that way."

"Have you questioned your people here to make sure none of them admitted him?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective said no more then, but bent over the dead man and made a stricter search. Accustomed to dealing with such matters he had acquired skill almost that of a surgeon in certain ways, and he made due progress, now. Saying nothing he soon arrived at a decision. There were marks on the body

"Have you ever heard of the Deserter Sergeant?"

"I has."

"And I has seen him," added Number Four.

"Have you not heard that he resembles Buffalo Bill?"

"I has," said Number Four, and he continued:

"He do, too."

"You know that the Deserter Sergeant went to the mines, if you know anything about him, and that he is under sentence of death for murder, desertion and other acts?"

"So I have heard," Number Two remarked.

"Well, if any of you have ever seen Brick Benson, the Deserter Sergeant, you should know that I am that man."

"He do look like ther sergeant, pards, powerful like him, fer I played some games with him onst, and he jist tuk my whole pile, too."

"Does yer recommender me, pard?" asked Number Three.

"How can I tell, as you are masked?"

"Thet are so."

"Remove your mask and I will tell you."

"No yer don't, for it are ag'in' orders in our lay-out ter know each other."

"Well, as for myself, I do not care who sees my face or knows me, though I would rather not disobey orders."

"Still, you caught me on my way to the rendezvous and before I could put my mask on."

"As you have seen me now, it's no use hiding; but see, let me introduce myself, pards, as Number One," and as the scout spoke he took from his pocket the mask which he had gotten from Brick Benson, and put it on.

"Pard, yer is right, and we is wrong, so we gives up ther game," said Number Two.

"I told you it was a case of mistaken identity, so now remove these lariats, please, and we'll go on for the rendezvous together, for I suppose the captain is there?"

"Yas, he is thar, and he are expectin' yer."

"Expecting me?"

"Waal, yas, for he said he had sent Number One off on a leetle matter o' important biz, and were a trifle anxious about him, so he'll be glad ter see yer."

The lariats were now removed from the scout's neck and body, and the whole party rode back on the trail, Buffalo Bill now masked and busy with his thoughts of how many times more in life would Good Fortune be his friend in cases of need.

CHAPTER XXV.

A DREADED Foe.

BUFFALO BILL had surmised correctly, when he saw Snow Face slip away from his cabin, and with an Indian head-dress and blanket thrown over him, make his way to the nearest of the villages in the valley, while he pretended to be indoors writing a letter for him, as the pretended Deserter Sergeant, to carry back to Captain Brimstone.

Snow Face had great confidence in his under chief, Cut Nose, and so picked him out for the work in hand, which was no more or less than to kill the messenger from an ambush.

He had told him to go to the spot, where he knew there was a perfect hiding-place, and take with him a brave whom he could depend upon.

Then, as the scout, or rather, supposed deserter, came along, to kill him and bring his body back to the cabin for him to search.

Cut Nose was only too happy to carry out his orders, and had selected his truest brave.

But the result is known, and it remains to tell of how Snow Face heard the news of his warriors' end.

He had intended making Cut Nose the bearer of his letter to Captain Brimstone, telling the outlaw leader that his messenger had unfortunately lost his life by falling over a precipice.

But he sprung to his feet with more show of excitement than was his wont when the party he had sent out to see what had become of Cut Nose returned, bearing the bodies of the two Indians, and the "talking paper," as the redskins called the note left by the scout.

He read it through, and he at once saw that it was best to do as the writer suggested, and not allow the redskins to know that one who was a member of the outlaw band, who were to be the allies of the Sioux, had been guilty of killing two of his warriors.

It would not do to let this be known, and as Cut Nose and the brave who accompanied him alone knew that he, Snow Face, had sent them to kill the messenger, it could be arranged so as to cast no suspicion upon him.

Upon the contrary, the cunning Snow Face intended to let the outlaw allies benefit by the act of the Deserter Sergeant.

"So he at once summoned all of the head chiefs to his cabin and appeared before them with the slip of paper in his hand.

This he pretended to read to them, and his version was that the messenger, a brave white chief, had found foes coming to the Indian village, and had aided Cut Nose and the brave to beat them off.

Cutnose had been slain, also the warrior with him, but the enemy had retreated, and he had

written to him, Snow Face, the story of the affair.

The chiefs were in an angry humor.

Redskins are always fiercely angry when one of their number has been killed in battle; but the idea of doubting the great white chief never for a moment entered the head of any of those present.

Instead, they felt glad to have so brave a friend as the outlawed Deserter Sergeant, and were happy in having allies such as the Brimstone Brotherhood would be, especially as they would share their plunder with them.

Having dismissed his chiefs, after giving orders to send a scouting-party ahead the next day to make or complete the circuit of the village, merely as a blind, however, Snow Face sought the room where his wife awaited him.

"You have heard, Irma?" he said, assuringly.

"Yes, I listened," said the woman, who understood the Sioux tongue well.

"That messenger was dangerous, it seems."

"He looked it."

"Cut Nose was my best chief, and the brave with him was also a picked warrior."

"Yet the deserter killed both."

"So it seems."

"And will betray my presence here?"

"No; at least, see what his letter says."

The woman took the letter and read it through without comment until she had finished it.

Then she said:

"I will trust him."

"We can do nothing else, until—"

"Until what?"

"Well, there is but one thing for me to do, Irma."

"And that is, chief?"

"Kill Edmund Allyn!"

There was something in the tone, as well as the words uttered, that caused the woman to start and say, quickly:

"Can you mean it?"

"I do."

"You seem to forget."

"I forget nothing."

"You certainly forget the past, and that he saved you from being hanged."

"Could I forget that?"

"You appear to have done so when you threaten to kill him."

"He is my most dreaded foe."

"He has cause to be."

"Ha! you defend him?"

"Oh, no: I merely tell you the truth, and I would not wish to see you kill that man of all others."

"But I must."

"Why?"

"He will know of your presence here."

"How can he, if I go into hiding, should he come here, and you have but to instruct your warriors to allow no one to come here until you have first gone to the post to see them."

"In that time I can hide, should you bring him on here."

"Your being here might be kept from him, Irma, but for that man."

"The deserter?"

"Yes."

"You feel that he will betray you?"

"I feel sure of it."

"I do not."

"Well, I can tell, when I meet Brimstone, as meet him I suppose I must before long, and if he shows that he suspects that you are here then he dies at once!"

"You will have your way, I suppose, Douglas, but I believe your downfall will begin from the day you take Edmund Allyn's life."

"My downfall! Good God! am I not a renegade to my own race?"

"Could I sink lower?" the man said, with mingled bitterness and ferocity.

"Yes, you could lose your life in the way you dread."

The man shuddered, and the woman continued in a low, thoughtful tone:

"Now, you are a fugitive from justice, it is true, a renegade, and yet you have a thousand brave warriors to protect you, and your raids upon the mines, with your braves at your back, are enriching you."

"Through Allyn you are to obtain more, and we can fly from here, when your wealth equals your hopes, and there are other lands where we can dwell in luxury, unknown to any one."

"But if you add to your crimes the life of Edmund Allyn, then I believe you seal your doom with his death."

"Think of this, Douglas."

Her words had made a deep impression upon the man, for he said, hoarsely:

"Let him live, then."

"You say this?"

"Yes, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"He knows you are here—then he shall die!" was the fierce rejoinder.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ALONE.

CHEEKY, the remaining captor, or rather kidnapper, of Kate Kennerley, was a man who deserved his name.

When headed off at the ford by the man he

believed far back in the rear, and wounded, while his horse was dead, he was nonplused decidedly, and the quick and awful fate of his companion, Brass, was a terrible shock to him.

He saw but one course to pursue, for a retreat meant death, and so he surrendered at discretion, as has been seen.

As he neared the shore he was under the rifle of the young officer, and yet his brain was busy plotting an escape.

He knew the ford well, having often crossed there before, and he saw a shadow of hope, he thought.

It was at least worth a risk, and he took it, for he said quickly:

"Halt, miss, for thar is danger ther way you goes," and aloud he called out:

"Say, cap'n, ther lariat are tied to ther lady and her horse, and ter me, so I'd jist better let 'em loose, as it are dangerous."

"First give to that lady your belt of arms!" came the stern response.

With a sigh the man halted the horses, and, unbuckling his belt, handed it over, and Kate placed it upon the horn of her saddle.

"Your rifle, too, sir!" came the stern command, and the weapon was unslung and also passed over.

"Now guide that lady in safety, or I will pull trigger on you."

"And that means suddint death," muttered Cheeky, as he rode to the side of Kate and caught hold of her bridle-rein.

Then they moved on along the narrow ridge of rock, which formed the ford across the river.

At last the horses were within a few yards of the shore, when suddenly the animal ridden by Kate Kennerley lost his footing.

It was the act of the outlaw, though it seemed not to be; but he knew that the ridge there was barely wide enough for one horse, and he kept his upon it, while a movement of his hand upon the rein threw Kate's horse off.

The sudden plunge, then the rearing of the animal, unseated the maiden, and she was thrown into the swift-flowing stream, while the outlaw, to prevent his own horse being dragged off the ridge, let go the rein, and away went the struggling steed toward the falls, in hot pursuit of his fair rider.

In an instant had Fred Forrester taken in the situation, and dashing down his rifle he sprung upon the rocks and plunged in.

Almost before Kate had gone twenty feet he rose by her side, and an arm was about her slender waist, while he struck out boldly for the steep bank.

He knew his danger well, for if he swept by the point near him, the bank was too steep to gain a footing, and both would be hurled over the falls to certain death.

With Herculean efforts he reached the point, grasped an overhanging limb, and held on, though it threatened to break loose, and Kate also seizing it, held on, while he reached the bank and drew her out.

It had taken hardly a minute, but in that time Cheeky had gained the bank also, and the clatter of his horse's hoofs was heard going through the timber.

He had the chance to escape, and made good use of it, not seeming to realize that he could be master of the situation did he seize the weapons thrown aside by the young officer.

But ere he had gone a couple of hundred yards the thought flashed upon him that he had been too anxious to get away and was unarmed, and wheeling his horse he rode back.

He did not know whether the officer had rescued the maiden, and escaped death himself, but he rather thought, from his bold plunge and splendid swimming that he had, and it struck him that he had best go slow.

This thought flashed upon him just in time to save his life, for he suddenly beheld in the gathering twilight the lieutenant running for his weapons, and turning his horse hesped away like the wind, followed, however, by a few shots sent flying after him at random.

"We are dismounted, Miss Kennerley, but I have my arms," said Fred Forrester, as he turned to the maiden, who just then approached him, her riding-habit dripping wet and clinging about her exquisite form as she walked.

She stepped up close to him and placed her hand on his as he held his rifle, which he had just discharged at the fleeing outlaw.

"Lieutenant Forrester, you know all that I owe to you, so why need I tell you how I appreciate your noble sacrifice for me?"

"Will you not believe that my heart is full of gratitude to you for it?"

"I gave you warning of danger, Miss Kennerley, and for your sake regret that you did not follow it, for it places you in an unfortunate position, drenched as you are, and eight miles from the fort."

His words seemed to ignore her gratitude and look to the present, not the past.

"It might have been far worse, sir, had those men carried me off, and death in yonder fall, had you not bravely risked your life to save mine."

"I am happy in having done a good act to atone for my past," he said, bitterly, and then quickly added:

"But let us decide what is to be done."

"The fort is eight miles away?"

"Yes."

"I cannot walk there, for my horse struck my ankle with his hoof and I am really lame."

"I am sorry; but, do you dare remain here alone?"

"Yes."

"I will see first if I can find my runaway horse, and if not, will take this lariat, which that man dropped, and make you a swing to sit in, upon yonder limb, where no wolf can reach you, and let you have one of my revolvers, while I cross the river and hasten to the fort."

"I will remain, sir; but first see, please, if you can find my horse."

And Kate shuddered as she glanced about her at the deepening shadows.

Fred Forrester hastened away, but his search was fruitless, though he found his *serape*, which had fallen from his saddle.

With this, the lariat and some boughs, he then made a secure swing upon a limb which was some seven feet from the ground, and placing Kate in it he drew her up and made the rope fast.

"You are in no danger from wolves, and no one passing would see you here, Miss Kennerley, so have no fear."

"Here is a revolver as company, and good company it is, too; and I am a good walker, so will be back within three hours."

"Good-night! and do not lose your nerve."

"Good-night!"

And she held forth her hand.

Lightly touching it, he dropped from the limb to the ground, and watching him she saw his tall form disappear, heard him enter the river at the ford, and then silence followed, broken only by the howling of a wolf now and then, and the roaring of the swiftly flowing river as it tumbled over the falls.

"I am utterly alone here in this wilderness," she murmured.

And the thought was one to appal a braver heart than hers.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TO HER RESCUE.

FRED FORRESTER felt the full responsibility upon him of going to the rescue of Kate Kennerley, and leaving her alone to await his coming back.

To one reared as she had been, to find herself alone in a howling wilderness, with Indians roaming about, her kidnapper perhaps not far away, and the forests echoing to the dismal howl of the wolf, he knew must be appalling.

He had arranged the lariat swing, or rather seat as well as possible, for with the boughs and *serape* he had made a comfortable nest of it.

She was wet through, but the *serape* would keep her from a chill, and she was high enough from the ground to escape the wolves.

Then, too, he had left her a revolver, and he was determined not to be gone longer than was absolutely necessary.

Crossing the river at the ford, and holding his rifle above his head, he reached the other shore, and started off at a swinging trot which he knew would carry him four miles an hour, if not more, over the uneven ground.

He was a perfect athlete, and yet had not fully recovered his former strength, after the wound he had received; but he held on bravely, and at last the distant lights of the fort came in sight.

He was tired, after his long ride, then swim for life, afterward struggle through the swift waters in crossing the ford, and eight-mile run; but he did not think of self, only that lone girl in the forest behind him.

His wet clothes made the weight to carry considerable, and he had his rifle also and heavy cavalry boots.

At last he was halted by the sentinel, but readily gave the countersign and entered.

He was gazed at curiously as he entered the headquarters, for there were quite a number of officers and ladies there, all discussing the absence of the lieutenant and non-return of the beautiful girl who had now become the very idol of the fort.

Unheeding all, Fred Forrester walked up to the general, who arose quickly as he saw him, and he gazed at the haggard face, wet, mud-stained uniform and hatless officer, for he had lost his fatigue cap when he sprang to the rescue of Kate in the river.

"Pardon me, General Carr, but I wish to report my unavoidable absence from parade, sir, as I was detained by the attempt to rescue Miss Kennerley from kidnappers."

"She is now eight miles from here, sir, across the river and alone in the timber, and I beg leave to return with a squad of my men for her, sir, as her situation is decidedly unpleasant and unfortunate."

Such was the modest report of the young officer.

Several, in their excitement, forgetting that they had "cut" him, now spoke, eagerly asking questions, but the cool stare they got in return checked their enthusiasm.

"This is startling news you bring, Mr. For-

rester, and of course your excuse is sufficient to account for your absence without leave," said General Carr, in kindly tones, for he saw that the officer was really suffering.

"I will, general, with your permission, at once go to the rescue of Miss Kennerley," said Burke Blackford, whose wealth and aristocratic family caused him to put on airs with all at the fort who would tolerate it, and, admired by the ladies, and toadied by some of the officers, he was considered a privileged character.

"As I understand Mr. Forrester, sir, Miss Kennerley has already been rescued, and Lieutenant Forrester has asked to go after her, though, as he seems to be suffering, I would be glad if he would allow some officer to take his place."

"Is Surgeon Powell here?" and Forrester glanced about him.

"No; Powell, with Texas Jack, left at sunset on the trail of Miss Kennerley, when she failed to appear," replied the general.

"Then I understand that you wish me to go, general?" said Blackford, eagerly.

"No, sir, you understand no such thing, for it rests with Mr. Forrester."

"I am only fatigued, sir, so can return; but I thought if Surgeon Powell were here he could go," and then came the words, and look directly at Burke Blackford, "for he is a man of undoubted courage, and has the good sense to find her by my direction."

Burke Blackford's face flushed, and some laughed—those who did not like him; but with a salute Fred Forrester wheeled on his heel and left the room.

He at once ordered a dozen of his men to mount for the trail, and, without changing his wet clothing, mounted another horse he owned, and, with a led animal saddled for Kate, started on his return to relieve her from her desolate position, while all at the fort, expecting her return within a couple of hours, determined to sit up and await her coming, while they discussed the pros and cons of the case, and wondered at her strange adventure, and how it happened that the man who was looked upon as having defrauded her of five thousand dollars was so conveniently near to rescue her from kidnappers.

Upon reaching the river, the gallant lieutenant led the way across, the men following in Indian file, and, as they neared the other bank, suddenly there rung out from up in the foliage of the trees a pistol-shot, followed by the wild yells of red-skins.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TWO TRAILERS.

WHEN it became known at the fort that Miss Kennerley, who had ridden out alone on the prairie sketching, had not returned, and that Lieutenant Forrester had not appeared at dress parade, and could nowhere be found, Surgeon Powell at once went over to the quarters of the scouts.

"Where is Texas Jack?" he asked one of the scouts whom he met.

"In his quarters, sir; shall I call him?" answered the man, politely, for outside of being an officer demanding respect, Frank Powell was popular with every one in the fort.

"No, thank you, I'll go there," and soon after the surgeon entered the quarters of the Texan scout, who was next to Buffalo Bill in rank.

"Ah, Surgeon Powell, come in, sir," said the scout, a handsome, well-formed young man, with a bright, piercing eye and long, waving hair.

"Jack, I called to ask you to go on a scout with me."

"Yes, doctor, I am ready, sir."

"Buffalo Bill is away, and news has just come in that Miss Kennerley left the fort alone and has not returned, and Indians are known to be about."

"So I have reported, sir, to the general."

"Then Lieutenant Forrester left the fort today and has not come back, so I wish to see if we cannot be on hand at dawn to discover what harm has befallen them."

"I am ready, Surgeon Powell."

"Well, get ready and I will soon join you and we will go to the Twin Cottonwoods, where Miss Kennerley is said to have gone, and my idea is that Forrester sought to protect her and got into trouble himself."

"Doubtless so, sir, and, poor fellow! he seems anxious to atone for the cloud upon him."

"But I'll be ready, Surgeon Powell," answered Texas Jack, and he set to work preparing for the trail, while Frank Powell sought the quarters of General Carr and told him of his and Texas Jack's desire to take the trail.

"All right, Powell, I am glad to see you do so, for I believe that Forrester went to have an eye on Miss Kennerley, whom he warned not to go, Mrs. Denton tells me."

So Surgeon Frank Powell and Texas Jack mounted their horses and started off in the darkness.

"Which way, doctor?" asked the scout, as the two left the fort behind them.

"To the Twin Cottonwoods, for we may be able to make some discovery to-night, and if

not, we will be on hand at the first peep of day."

The glen was reached, and cautiously approached, and Surgeon Powell picked up a handkerchief, which he at once said was Miss Kennerley's.

It was a small one, with initials embroidered in one corner, and striking a match, he saw the letters:

"K. K."

"She was here, Jack."

"Yes, sir, we are right to begin with," was the reply of the scout, and, staking out their horses, they spread their blankets near by and sought rest.

It was not dawn when they awoke; but by the time that they had eaten their breakfast and had their horses saddled, the light was bright enough for them to see the marks upon the ground.

Then both men set to work with the skill of perfect trailers, one in one direction, the other in another.

They worked silently, first in a circle, then nearing the spot where the handkerchief had been found, until they both met at the spot where Kate Kennerley had been surprised by Cheeky.

"Well, Jack?"

"She came from the fort, doctor, and set to work right there—see, there are the marks of her easel, and here is her camp-stool."

"I see; and then?"

"A horseman rode from the ridge yonder, left his horse behind that thicket, and came on foot to this spot and surprised her."

"I guess it was the lieutenant, sir, as he was alone, and she packed up her traps, mounted and rode away with him back toward the ridge."

"All right, Jack, except that it was not Forrester who joined her."

"Who then?"

"I know the track of Forrester's horse, and his trail comes over yonder hill, and down yonder is where he fell heavily, and there is a blood-stain on the ground; but he is not there, so must have been but slightly wounded, for the trail turns off squarely to the river, and ends there, so that he swam across."

"It is a dangerous place to make the swim, doctor."

"True, but Forrester is a bold fellow; but this proves I was right, as to the lieutenant having been here, and now we will strike your trail and follow it."

This they did, and, reading the signs with the skill of experts, they soon discovered that another horseman had come from the ridge and met the two going up, and then all three had held along the river-bank toward the ford some six miles above.

At a canter they held on the now broadly-seen trail until the fork was reached, and here was discovered another trail.

It was made by a number of horses, going and coming a search revealed, and both came and went in the direction of the fort.

"Jack, soldiers have passed here."

"Yes, sir, and returned."

"The tracks show that they were the same party."

"Yes, sir; and the trail was made in the night."

"And leads across the river."

"Yes, doctor, but I never knew this ford to be attempted at night, for one has to see to keep on the rock ridge, and a mistake is pretty sure to end with a trip over the falls."

"Well, as both trails, going and coming, were made in the night, we will cross and see where they lead to."

And Surgeon Powell plunged in, the scout following.

"My idea is," continued the Surgeon Scout, calling back to Texas Jack, "that, as Forrester crossed the river he cut off the bend, returned to the fort after we left, and got a force to pursue whoever were the captors of Miss Kennerley."

"It looks so, doctor, and the captors were white men, for they did not seem to behave as Indians, from their trails."

They had now gotten across to the other shore, and in a few minutes the two drew rein, while Texas Jack said, as he gazed about him:

"There has been music here, Surgeon Powell."

"Yes, Jack."

And the two men began to read the signs, which consisted of a couple of dead troop horses here, several Indian ponies scattered here and there, and some rudely-made graves, six in number, over under a tree.

"Jack, this trail was made by Indians, and they were flying, and this other by the troopers on their return to the fort, so we can but go back and see what has been done, and not act in the dark."

"Yes, sir," was the response of Texas Jack, who pointed to the trail and said: "Doctor, there is the trail of Lieutenant Forrester's horse, and he did swim the river and come here."

"Yes; and I believe he brought the troopers

here, and I only hope they rescued Miss Kennerley."

"That is certain."

"Why?"

"They do not follow the red-skin trail, which would be the case if they had not rescued her."

"You are right, Jack, for Forrester would have camped on the trail until dawn, and then followed."

An hour later they were at the fort, and General Carr listened to their report with great interest, and then asked:

"Has any one told you what happened, Surgeon Powell?"

"No, sir."

"Nor you, Jack?"

"No, sir."

"Then you are both remarkable trailers, for you have read the signs like an open book," was the response of General Carr, whose admiration was great at the "sign reading" of the surgeon and the scout.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WOMAN'S NERVE.

WHEN Kate Kennerley was left alone in the forest by Fred Forrester, she was at first quite brave, and determined to keep up a stout heart.

"It will only be for a few hours, and I am safe up here," she muttered to herself.

Then she fell to admiring her very comfortable swing, made for her by the officer, and she saw that it was too high up for a wolf to reach her by springing into the air.

Then she had hardly been cheered by this reflection before she began to dread bears.

"A bear could climb the tree and come out upon the limb," she said with a feeling of renewed dread.

She saw, however, in the darkness though it was, that the tree and limb where she was, would not uphold the weight of a bear, and again she was cheered.

But her next trouble was to recall the fact that panthers and wildcats were smaller and more active than bears, and one of these animals might take a fancy to pay her a visit.

"I would hear them, and see their eyes, and could kill them," she decided.

So she was again cheered, and only wished that she knew how long the lieutenant had been gone.

She had heard him plunge into the river, after which silence had come upon her, and yet a silence that was not stillness.

It was a silence of nature that was broken by the roar of the falls, and the yelping of a coyote.

She did not find her swinging seat uncomfortable, for it was, on the contrary, quite comfortable, and certainly safe.

She could lean back in it and rest.

But then, her riding-habit was wet, she was wet through her clothing by her plunge into the river, and began to feel cold.

Then she drew the *serape* about her and felt a trifle warmer; but it did not prevent her from feeling chilly.

Then she moved her position and awoke to the consciousness that her ankle pained her.

Her horse in his struggle had struck her a blow on her ankle with his hoof, and it was becoming really painful.

But for this she would have risked the crossing of the ford and the long tramp to the fort.

It was true that Lieutenant Forrester had offered to carry her, telling her that though slow work, he could get her to the fort by morning, and it would prevent her from being left alone; but this she had firmly refused to permit, and had chosen to wait in the tree until his return.

An hour and a half thus passed, and it seemed an age to the shivering, anxious, terrified girl, and she was about to give way to her feelings in a burst of tears when she heard the fall of horses' hoofs.

"Why, he is coming! how short a while he has been gone," she cried, as she now realized that the time had not been long in reality, only in her dread anxiety.

She saw then some shadowy forms appear in sight, and she was about to call them when suddenly she remembered that they had not come across the river.

They had come up the river, along the bank which she was on.

Who could they be, she wondered.

Straight to where she was they came, riding in Indian file, and silent.

She held her breath in awe, and, as with a low command from the leader, they halted, her heart seemed to fairly cease to beat.

The words were uttered in guttural tones and in a language unknown to her.

Then she knew who they were.

"They are Sioux," came from between her teeth.

And watching the forms, looking like shadowy phantoms in the darkness, she saw them move about, stake out their horses and go into camp.

Two scouts had gone off, as though to reconnoiter, or stand as sentinels, and the balance, two-score in number, had gone into camp.

They were not a hundred and fifty feet from

her, and she saw them gather wood and light a fire.

As the flames brightened, it revealed them in all their horror.

They were savages on the war-path, painted, feathered and armed for the fray.

They built two fires and began to cook their supper of game, looking like devils in the fire-light glare.

She was not seen, and it was unlikely that she would be, unless they remained in camp until after dawn.

Still the thought was appalling, and it was only by the strongest effort she could restrain from crying out in her despair.

Her nerves had been severely taxed by her having been kidnapped, her rescue, and the narrow escape from death she had made in the river, and she was unnerved almost.

Then came to her the terrible thought of Lieutenant Forrester's return.

He might bring but a few men with him and dash right into the midst of the red-skins, for he would hardly be aware of their presence there.

This would end in his death and that of the troopers, she was certain.

They would hear him coming, their fires, after supper, would die out, and they could ambush him.

With these thoughts in her mind, her courage rose, for she was anxious to be able to save the officer and his men.

The wolves, bears and wildcats were dismissed without more thought, and the chilly feeling had left her.

She nerved herself to save Forrester and his men from being caught in a trap.

She clutched the revolvers he had left with her, and waited.

The red-skins ate heartily of their supper of game, smoked their pipes, and one by one went off and rolled themselves in their blankets.

She noted two of them walk off, and then the couple who had done sentinel duty came to get their supper, showing that they were not far away.

This Kate was glad to see, as she feared the guards might discover the coming soldiers a long way off, and thus give ample warning, so that an ambush could be formed.

Soon the camp was as silent as the grave.

The two red-skin sentinels had returned to their posts, and two-score Indian warriors were wrapped in their blankets and sleeping within three hundred feet of the brave girl, whose eyes were wide open, peering through the darkness upon them, or rather where she had seen them show themselves to seek repose.

Thus the minutes dragged along until the straining ears of the beautiful watcher caught the clank of steel against steel.

"They are coming," she said, and as to prove that she was not mistaken, the two sentinels glided like black phantoms into the camp.

They too had heard the sound and came to give warning of a foe near.

A few low words aroused the Indians, and silently and quickly they saddled their ponies and stood ready to meet an attack, or rather to give a surprise.

The tramp of the troopers' horses were now heard, and the red-skins were ranged across the ford trail in the timber.

They were dismounted, but hitched behind them were their ponies.

The plunge of the coming troopers into the river was heard, and then came an order from their chief.

He intended to rush forward and shoot them down at the ford.

As each red-skin moved forward in a line, dodging as was their wont, from tree to tree, Kate Kennerley knew that it was her time to act.

And she acted promptly too.

Suddenly, in the rear of the red-skins rung out a sharp report.

They were horrified and uttered wild yells.

They supposed that they had been flanked and attacked in the rear, and then followed, in quick succession, five reports, while the bullets flew through the timber.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SHADOWS DEEPEN.

LIEUTENANT FRED FORRESTER, and every man with him, who went to the rescue of Kate Kennerley, were forced to admit that the one whom they had gone to save had saved them.

But for the fact that Kate had opened fire with her revolvers, upon the red-skins, in their rear, they would have poured a withering volley upon the troopers, gotten them at disadvantage, by a complete surprise and being in the swift stream.

But the shots of the brave girl warned the troopers of danger, and it revealed who their foes were by causing the Indians to break forth in wild yells of mingled terror and defiance.

Coming from behind them, as the firing did, it caused the red-skins to believe that their presence there was known, that they were attacked in front and in the rear, and feeling that

the soldiers must be in force they turned and fled for their ponies.

The moment that there was a hesitancy on the part of the foe, Fred Forrester rushed on with his gallant riders, and at once a sharp fight was begun.

Believing that the foe behind them was in ambush, not having revealed themselves, the red-skins sprung upon their horses, or the first horse they came to and sped away through the timber.

Some fought, it was true, and several of the troopers were wounded, there was one killed, and two horses had gone down to rise no more.

But the Indians had been forced to leave half-a-dozen dead upon the field, and all their plunder, for they were returning from a raid.

"How different it would have been for us but for Miss Kennerley's brave act," said Forrester to his sergeant, and he spurred up to the tree where the maiden sat in her swing, awaiting the result of the short, sharp fight with intense suspense.

"Miss Kennerley, you are safe, and we owe you our lives."

"You should have a medal for your courage to-night, for those shots saved us from an ambush," and the young officer raised his hat politely and bent low.

"What trouble have I not caused by not following your advice, sir!"

"I fear I shall never forgive myself."

"The fortunes of war only, Miss Kennerley, and you have helped us to punish the red-skins and retake a large amount of booty they had taken, with some horses, besides."

"You deserve a medal."

"I am glad you look at it so kindly, Lieutenant Forrester; but I owe you my warmest gratitude for all you have done for me to-night."

"Will you help me down, please, for I am oh, so willing to return to the fort."

He unfastened the lariat-end from about the tree and lowered the swing, and a moment after had raised her to the saddle of the horse he had brought.

Leaving the sergeant and his men to look after the wounded and bury the dead Indians, he called to one soldier to accompany him, and rode to the fort, saying that he would send help at once.

Kate Kennerley rode by his side, and she was strangely silent, for her thoughts were busy.

Would not this gallant act of the ostracized lieutenant remove the cloud from upon him? she wondered.

At last the fort was reached, and the officer carried her directly to the quarters of the major, where a crowd were assembled to greet her.

Her toilet was certainly not prepossessing after all she had gone through, but she looked very beautiful still, and Mrs. Denton and others greeted her most warmly, while General Carr said:

"Welcome back, my fair heroine, for certainly you have won the title of one after to-night's adventure."

"Thank you, general, but Lieutenant Forrester is the hero, as you will know when I tell you all that he has done; but, will I ever be forgiven for this terrible trouble I have caused you all?"

"You are forgiven beforehand, I assure you; but tell us of the affair, for that silent Forrester merely reported that he had run upon some red-skins, and your pluck saved him and his men from an ambush."

Then Kate told her story just as it all had occurred, and instead of praise for the hero only unkind remarks were made, for the wife of a captain said:

"I wonder if they were really Indians, and if the gallant lieutenant did not arrange the affair to play the hero and thus cancel his debt to you, Miss Kennerley?"

A silence fell upon all, and General Carr bit his lips with anger, while he seemed about to speak and then checked himself.

Major Denton also flushed an rily, and his wife was about to utter a sharp reproof, when Kate turned upon her quickly.

Her eyes flashed, and her voice quivered as she said:

"Did I not say, Mrs. Lyons, that one soldier was killed and several were wounded? Your nature must be a warped one, indeed, to make evil out of good."

The words, the manner were cutting, and Mrs. Lyons flushed and paled under them, while Mrs. Denton, feeling for her, though knowing she deserved the rebuke, said:

"Come, Kate, you are worn out and nervous, so must retire."

And she led her from the room, while Mrs. Lyons hastily slipped away, feeling that she had indeed gone too far.

But her words were spoken, and they bore fruit, for many, prejudiced already against Fred Forrester, were only too willing to still deepen the shadow upon his life, and it was not long before it seemed to be accepted by many that the young officer's daily rides alone upon the prairies had been for a purpose, and that he had been striving to cancel his indebtedness to the heiress by pretending to rescue her from capture.

The Indian affair they thought might have been a real attack; but the two kidnappers were said to have been in his pay.

And among the most loud speakers, in spreading this opinion, was Lieutenant Burke Blackford, the brother of Mrs. Lyons.

But from whatever source it came, the shadows were deepened over the head of the unfortunate lieutenant.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AT THE RENDEZVOUS.

THE spot chosen by Captain Brimstone as a rendezvous for the picked men he had chosen for his outlaw band, was one well suited to those whose lives were in their hands, and whose hands were raised against honorable men.

It was in a mountain canyon, hard of access, and trebly so if the trail thereto was defended by bold men.

The spot was known to the Indians as the Spirit Canyon, from some legend handed down to them, and they avoided it, and old trappers and hunters shunned the place, as they said any man who had gone there, to hunt, or sojourn, had never returned.

Once, with several miners, Captain Brimstone had invaded the mysterious canyon, and the skeleton remains of several men and horses in a deep gorge, revealed the fact that those who had gone there had gone down in a landslide into a place from which there was no escape up the steep sides.

There were also the skeleton remains of a number of wild animals, deer, bear, wolves and smaller game that had been caught in the same death-trap, and but for the sliding away of the trail around the mountain-side, before Captain Brimstone had ridden upon it, they too would have gone down into the fatal den.

The concussion of a deep clap of thunder, for a storm was approaching, shook the frail trail loose before the outlaw and his men rode upon it.

While the men were congratulating themselves upon their remarkable escape, Captain Brimstone was taking in the situation in silence for future reference.

So he called his men back, and one day went alone to the canyon, and the result was his decision to make it a rendezvous.

He flanked the dangerous landslide and entered the canyon from the other end, but determined to use the dangerous approach as a means of protection.

So a warning note was put up at the spot of peril, warning the men to come around, and the camp of the Brimstone Brotherhood was pitched in the further end of the canyon.

Here the chief awaited the arrival of his men, and especially the coming of the trusted courier, whom he had sent to visit the village of Snow Face the white renegade chief of the Sioux.

The outlaw chief had determined to play a bold game for gold.

Brick Benson had told Buffalo Bill that Captain Brimstone was none other than the elegant sport known as "Gambler Gaul," who was known along the frontier posts and in the mining-camps; but whether he was or not, the mask he wore completely hid.

He was a man of handsome physique, as he paced to and fro in the canyon, before the tent which he had brought there with him on a pack-horse.

There were other tents pitched about, for the men, for Captain Brimstone had come well prepared for a campaign.

He had brought two men with him who acted as servants, one to cook, and the other to look after his horses and individual comfort.

These had given the place a very comfortable look before the arrival of one of the outlaws.

To each of his picked men the outlaw chief had given perfect directions for reaching the place, and also told them just where they were to put their masks on.

One by one then the men began to drop in, and as they did so they were welcomed by their chief.

All came masked, and no two came together.

After a dozen had arrived, Captain Brimstone had sent Number Two and others out upon a scouting expedition, and these were the ones who had captured Buffalo Bill, and then been forced to the opinion that it was a case of mistaken identity.

When presented to the reader Captain Brimstone is pacing up and down before his tent.

He is dressed as stylishly as though for a ride on horseback in Central Park, New York.

Napoleon boots incase his feet, and a slouch hat of black, with a broad brim, is set upon his head in a rakish kind of manner.

The hat is enriched by a gold cord, and the flap is pinned up with a pin representing a torch-holder, of red, and in it a flame of blue.

Corduroy pants stuck in the boot-tops, a jacket of the same, a belt of arms, and a sash of red completed his costume, with the addition of a pair of Mexican spurs.

The men had nearly all arrived when one day a horseman appeared and reported for duty.

He was in buckskin, masked, and yet one who had seen his form and horse before would

have recognized, in spite of his mask, none other than Cheeky.

"You are Number Ten, I see," said Captain Brimstone, who knew each one of his men, though unknown to them.

"That's my name now, cap'n."

"Then about all of my men are here, except one I sent on a special mission."

"That's one hain't a-comin', cap'n," said Cheeky.

"Ah! how do you know that?"

"Wal, cap'n, we was pards for ever so long, and we meeted on ther way here, and I jist found out he were on ther same trail I was."

"So we plays pards once more and chipped in to capter a pretty gal from ther fort as there was money in, we thought, ef we brought her to you fer ransom."

"But a young officer as I knows ter be Lieutenant Forrester, jist sailed in and recaptured ther gal and sent my pard to ther bottom of ther stream we was a-crossing."

"What was his number?"

"Thirteen."

"Ah, yes, he went by the name of Brass in the mines; but is he dead?"

"Sart'in, cap'n."

"And you escaped?"

"I lit out, sir, leavin' ther leddy with ther officer."

"Lieutenant Forrester you say he was?"

"Yas, cap'n, and he were a dandy."

"And the lady was from Fort Fairview?"

"Yas, cap'n."

"I wonder if it could have been Miss Kennerley."

"That's ther name she told us was ther one she went by."

"Ah, you lost a prize, for she is very rich, and would have paid handsomely to be ransomed."

"But another time I will strike in that direction," and sending Cheeky to his tent, the chief turned to another party who just then rode into the canyon.

It was the four who had captured Buffalo Bill, and he was with them now, but wore a mask, and like the others, was now hidden from the eyes of his fellows.

Unheeding the four the chief sprung forward eagerly and cried:

"Ha! Number One, by all that's holy! Dis-mount and come to my tent at once."

And so it was that Buffalo Bill had entered the rendezvous of the Brimstone Brotherhood.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A STARTLING RESEMBLANCE.

WHEN Buffalo Bill left the fort upon the secret trail to discover the guilt or innocence of Lieutenant Forrester it was the hope of General Carr, and of the scout also, that proof of the court-martial's just verdict could be found, and if so, that the enemies of the young officer would have to acknowledge the cruel wrong they had done him.

He had been gone for several weeks, and excepting his hasty visit to General Carr at midnight and his letter by the dumb courier, which he had named Snow Face, after his renegade master, no word had come from him.

The scouts wondered where he was, and he was missed by many at the fort.

But there were two who were most anxious regarding him, though neither had spoken to the other regarding the subject.

These two were General Carr and Surgeon Frank Powell.

Lieutenant Forrester had been on duty since his illness and the court-martial, and General Carr longed to have Buffalo Bill return with the news of his perfect innocence.

But he alone knew how great was the risk which the scout had taken to find out the truth of the affair.

With the success of Buffalo Bill's plot not only would the truth be known about Fred Forrester, but the Brimstone Brotherhood would be dealt a deadly blow, and the trail to the village of Snow Face, the renegade, be known so that a secret force could be sent to attack the village.

So it was that the general realized all that depended upon the scout, and as the days passed he would become more anxious about him.

True, Buffalo Bill had already visited Snow Face, and representing himself to be the Deserter Sergeant, had passed as such; but then there was the greater danger still of impersonating Brick Benson among men who had known him well.

He had escaped detection from the keen eyes of Snow Face; but then, had the renegade ever seen the deserter, the general wondered.

That he knew the scout well by sight, he was well aware.

So General Carr could only keep his own counsel and hope for the best until the time appointed for the scout's return came around.

The month was up the very day before Kate Kennerley's adventure, and her rescue by Fred Forrester.

General Carr saw that the jealousy of several officers, at Forrester's rescue of the beautiful heiress, had made them more bitter toward the daring young lieutenant, and he intended to

administer a severe rebuke to the offenders, the first time that an opportunity was given him by any act or word against the officer.

Kate Kennerley had told him her story the next morning, and it showed him how gallant had been the behavior of Fred Forrester, and how modest his report of the affair toward himself.

Then Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack had brought in their account of their trailing, and the most prejudiced enemy of Lieutenant Forrester could not but admit that because he was under a cloud he yet had not been guilty of trying to curry favor with the heiress, to cancel thereby his debt of five thousand dollars.

A party of cavalry had been started to pursue the trail of the Indians, from their camp in the ford, and Lieutenant Forrester had resumed his duties as adjutant.

That evening at parade, the day following the one of Kate Kennerley's kidnapping, Lieutenant Forrester's voice rung out even sharper and sterner than before.

His orders were quick, his movements perfect, and he certainly looked very handsome in his handsome uniform.

But his face was pale and stern to severity, though his eyes shone with a fire that flashed defiance into the faces of those whom he knew to be his foes.

After parade, the lieutenant went up to speak to the general, who had sent for him.

There were in the group with the general, Major Denton, Surgeon Powell, several other officers and Mrs. Denton, Kate and half a dozen ladies.

As usual, Lieutenant Blackford was haunting the side of Kate Kennerley, and, as Forrester approached, said with a sneer:

"Ah! does the exiled lieutenant intend to break his rule by joining ladies and gentlemen?"

Kate turned and saw Fred Forrester approaching, and at once replied:

"I hope so indeed," and she bowed in a marked way to Forrester, as the general stepped forward and said, at the same time offering his hand:

"Forrester, I received your request, and acquiesced in it, that I would not have you read a special order complimenting you before the command for your gallant rescue of Miss Kennerley, but I desire to say here, before my friends, that I have reported your conduct to the Department commander, and personally thank you."

The tone and manner of the general was so marked that even Burke Blackford failed to sneer.

He knew how far to go, just, and he was quiet, for he had caught the general's eye upon him.

"And I, too, Forrester, wish to thank you, and it is my pleasure to tell you that by the promotion of your captain to the division staff, you are now the captain of your company."

And Major Denton grasped the hand of the officer, whose face crimsoned and then turned white again.

"Accept my congratulations, Captain Forrester," said Mrs. Denton, with a smile.

"And may I offer mine, and say that your promotion would have been deserved if only for your gallant rescue of me."

Something very like an oath sprung from Lieutenant Blackford's lips as he heard Kate Kennerley's warmly spoken words, for he muttered:

"Bah! I am a fool to suspect a woman can love a man who owes her money."

"By Jove! but I'll raise myself a peg in her regard."

"I'll do it."

And, just as Surgeon Powell released the hand of the promoted officer in offering his congratulations, Burke Blackford stepped forward and said:

"I say, Forrester, I must say you are young for a captain, but of course I am delighted and—"

He stopped suddenly, for the eyes of Fred Forrester met his own, and stern and distinct came the words:

"Lieutenant Blackford, at heart you are not sincere, and you are forcing your lips to utter what you do not feel, so pardon me if I refuse your hand."

Had an Indian arrow come flying over the stockade wall and struck in the midst of the group it would not have created a greater sensation than did the words of the young officer.

General Carr turned hastily away, as though he had not heard what was said, while blunt old Major Denton said, in his abrupt way:

"Dead center, that shot, eh, Blackford?"

What would have been the result then and there no one knows, for suddenly Billy Blew, the Boy Bugler, stepped forward with a salute and addressed Major Denton.

The eyes of Fred Forrester fell full upon his face, and the two looked straight at each other.

It was the first time that Fred Forrester had really had a good look at the Boy Bugler, and now, with a cry that seemed wrung from his heart, and with utter indifference to those who

ent, he sprung forward, grasped the youth by the shoulder and said, hoarsely, almost fiercely: "Boy, who are you? Speak! who are you, I ask?"

"Billie Blew, sir, the Boy Bugler of your own regiment," was the calm reply.

"My God! what a resemblance!" and without a word more the newly-appointed captain turned upon his heel and with a face that had turned to the hue of a corpse, walked away like one who moved mechanically.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HOME OF THE "OUTCAST OFFICER."

AFTER his strange exhibition of feeling, which no one could account for, when he beheld the Boy Bugler, Fred Forrester walked at once to his quarters.

Lieutenant Burke Blackford almost forgot the words addressed to him, in his joy at discovering that Forrester had been made to feel deeply, from some cause or other, which the sight of Billie Blew had brought up.

But there was one present who had noticed what others had failed to observe.

That one was Kate Kennerley, and her eyes had seen a strange look upon the Boy Bugler's face when Forrester had asked the question he did, and shown the feeling the sight of the youth caused an exhibition of.

On account of his handsome face and graceful form, added to his cheery manner and wonderful musical talent, Billie Blew had become a general favorite with all, and especially with the officers' families.

On several occasions Kate had talked with him, and had heard him tell the story of her uncle's death, and of the night of the coming of Fred Forrester to the rescue.

He too had corroborated what had been said by several of the men; that Captain Kennerley seemed to have had some reason for doubting Forrester, and so had extracted from him a pledge to deliver the five thousand dollars, and papers, to his ward and niece, and the other money to the fort paymaster.

Somehow Billie Blew had impressed Kate with the idea that he seemed to like to tell the story reflecting upon the honor of the lieutenant, and the expression which she saw on his face when Fred Forrester had seen him on the parade-ground convinced her that she was right.

The bugler had told her that he had not spoken a word to Lieutenant Forrester since coming to the fort, and yet, as she saw a smile, strangely like one of triumph, and in which she read an expression of venom, sweep over the youth's face, she mused to herself:

"Those two have met before, and the boy holds some secret against the lieutenant, I am sure."

The surprise felt by all was taken advantage of by Burke Blackford, who said in his drawling way:

"My boy, how is it you frightened the captain so, for he turned livid and looked positively scared—did he not, Miss Kennerley?"

"Never having seen fright on a man's face, Lieutenant Blackford, I am not one to appeal to; but the expression I observed seemed one of surprise and pain."

"I read it differently, so, my boy, tell me how it is that you frightened the captain so."

"I do not know, sir."

"Have you ever met him before?"

"In the fort, yes, sir, though he has not appeared to notice me before."

"Perhaps it was from your resemblance to some one whom he remembers with pain and regret, and if so we have no right to pry into Mr. Forrester's affairs."

"Come, Kate, shall we return home?" and Mrs. Denton settled the question very decidedly, and the words prevented further discussion, so the group separated.

Surgeon Powell had been a silent, but attentive observer of all that had happened, and so he made his way toward the newly-promoted officer's quarters.

He was glad of Forrester's promotion, especially so at the time, as he knew that he had been made to suffer deeply.

But then, the young officer had distinguished himself on several occasions, and his superiors had recommended him for promotion, while it was given up that he was the best soldier in the regiment, and, having graduated at the head of his class stood well with the War Department.

The promotion of his captain to the staff gave the chance of his advancement, as senior lieutenant of the company, and it had been a pleasure to Surgeon Powell when Major Denton had told Forrester of his good fortune.

When the little scene occurred with Billie Blew, Surgeon Frank Powell had taken it that the boy's face had recalled some startling and unhappy memory in the past of Fred Forrester.

But when he saw the look on the bugler's face, a smile that seemed to him really devilish in its expression, he came to the conclusion that the two had met before, and that it was the youth himself, and not a resemblance, that caused the officer to show the exhibition of feeling he had given way to.

So to the quarters of Fred Forrester he went.

ed his steps, and stepped upon the little piazza, just as the sun's last rays were dying out in the western horizon.

The quarters of Forrester were really those of his captain, who had been absent on special duty for some time, and they were apart from the others and very pleasantly situated on a rise, which commanded a view beyond the stockade.

There were four rooms in the little log cottage, and Forrester had indulged in the luxury of a piano, which he had had brought over the plains in an ambulance.

Besides the piano, there were other musical instruments—a guitar, flute, violin and cornet, all of which the officer played well, for he possessed rare musical skill.

Then, too, his walls were filled with paintings and sketches of his own, some of them bits of border scenery, others likenesses of friends, and one a well-executed work of his company standing at parade rest, every face being a likeness.

Then there were various caricatures, which in his days of popularity had afforded his many admirers much amusement.

An extensive library for a frontier-dweller, numerous pieces of *bric-a-brac*, with many little souvenirs made by feminine hands, completed the furnishings of his parlor.

Another room adjoining was where he slept, and here also was every comfort, showing his luxurious mode of living, while a third room was where he ate his meals, and over the door of which had been artistically painted:

"He who entereth here
Leaveth appetite behind."

A substantial mess-table, sideboard and chairs formed the furniture, but the table linen was of the finest and the service solid silver, and it had always been a pleasure to those who could get an invitation to dine with Forrester, for his cook was the best at the fort, and his semi-valet and butler was thoroughly trained.

The fourth room was used as a gymnasium, and in it were horizontal bars, a swing, Indian clubs, foils, swords, rifles, shotguns and revolvers.

Several fine dogs had been the close companions of the young officer, and his stables had had a half-dozen splendid horses.

In dress he had been something of an exquisite, and a solitaire diamond he wore on his left little finger had caught the eye of many a fair girl, who thought what a charming engagement pledge it would make.

A handsome watch and chain, a souvenir presented to him for saving several lives in a city fire, and a number of other pieces of jewelry he possessed were the admiration of his brother officers.

And all this luxury it was said had been won by gambling, and, if such was not the case, he never took the trouble to contradict the report.

Such was the home of the "outcast officer," as he had become known of late, up to the time of the mystery overhanging his career since his going to the rescue of Captain Kennerley and his train.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

AN UNFORGOTTEN AIR.

FRED FORRESTER walked to his quarters like one in a dream.

He did not show joy at his promotion, which would have given him the utmost delight a few months before, and perhaps he never thought of it.

He entered his quarters, laid aside his sword and hat mechanically, and began to pace to and fro, without putting on his fatigue uniform as was his wont.

Since his recovery no one, except his servant, had really entered his quarters, for, when Surgeon Powell called, they had been wont to sit upon the piazza, so that the doctor had not discovered the change which had occurred in the rooms.

The silver service had gone from the dining-room, and the paintings and sketches from the walls of the little parlor.

The piano too was missing, and a general appearance of clearing out was upon all sides.

What could it mean?

The elegant quarters of the dashing, one-time *debonair* lieutenant were now as plainly furnished as were those of the poorest junior officer at the fort.

Something had come over the spirit of the dream of Fred Forrester, surely.

As he paced the room now his brow was clouded, his lips set, and ever and anon he would mutter something to himself.

Presently there came the bang of his little gate, and he started, looked out of the door, and beheld Surgeon Powell.

Upon other visits he had met the surgeon upon the piazza and they had sat there together, but now he called out:

"Come in, Powell."

"Why, Forrester, you look as though you had seen a ghost, for you are white-faced and nervous."

"I have seen what to me was worse than a

ghost; but sit down," and the words seemed forced.

"My dear Forrester, you are not well, and you have exerted yourself too much, after your severe wound."

"I must look after you yet, I see," and the surgeon spoke in the low, tender-voiced manner natural to him.

The officer laughed bitterly and said:

"I am perfectly well physically, Powell, so there is no need of your services in that direction; but I suffer here, and here," and he put his hand first upon his heart, then upon his head.

"Perhaps I can help you, Forrester, so if you care to place confidence in me tell me of your troubles."

"If you need any money I have a few hundred laid up, which are at your service, I assure you."

"You dear good friend; but I have two months' pay due me, and a few hundred in hand—see, do you observe a change in my rooms?"

"I do, for they look sadly changed."

Another bitter laugh came from the lips of Forrester, and then he said:

"Powell, you are my friend and I trust you, so will tell you that when Sergeant Duke of my company went East on a sixty-days' leave, I sent by him my piano, silver, paintings and other things I could well do without."

"I have befriended Duke, and his home was near my own when we were boys, so I trust him thoroughly, and he has orders to sell all my things for the very highest sum he can get for them."

"I hope he can realize enough, with what I have, to nearly pay back the money I lost belonging to Miss Kennerley."

"When that is paid, I shall draw only my absolute needs from the paymaster, devoting the balance toward paying the Government back what I lost."

"If I stay in the army long enough, I shall pay it back, while if I get killed, I have an insurance on my life."

"Now you see what I am doing, only do not betray me."

"I have discharged one of my servants, and will sell all of my horses but two, along with my tandem cart and buggy, so you see I ought to get enough to pay Miss Kennerley every dollar."

"My dear Forrester, you are too sensitive about this, for only a few scandal-lovers believe you to have kept that money, and Miss Kennerley neither thinks of it, or needs it, I am sure."

"Still, I am guilty in the eyes of some."

"Had I not given up gambling, I might soon have won the amount, or perhaps lost far more. But I do not play cards now."

"Yes, that is remarked upon; but you must cheer up, Forrester, for you are a hero, remember, and a captain, and you'll live down these slurs of foes, my word upon it."

"But why do you not visit the general's, as he asks you to do, and Major Denton's, for certainly they are your friends?"

"I pay my duty-call at both places, Powell, and that is all I can or will do."

"I am no longer a society man, and I rather begin to find I am a pretty clever fellow, as I like my own company."

"You know this is no hint to you, for without your manly regard I would be desolate indeed, and I appreciate the kindly feeling of the men toward me, while I am sure I can count on Buffalo Bill. By the way, where is he?"

"Off on a scout."

"I have not seen him since I got over my wound."

"No, he came to see you before he left, and he is away on a special scout."

"He has been gone some time now, and I only hope no harm has befallen him."

"I hope not, but candidly am anxious about him, as the general is also. Hark!"

As silence fell between them the notes of a bugle broke upon their ears.

It was dark now, and they stepped out upon the piazza into the moonlight.

Then the notes of the bugle rose clear, ringing, pathetic, floating away into softest cadence, to the next burst forth in stirring melody.

Suddenly the air changed into the plaintive, weird notes of Campbell's "Soldier's Dream," and the bugle seemed fairly, under the touch of a master hand, to utter the words:

"The bugles sung truce, and the night-cloud had lowered,

And the sentinel stars set their watch in the sky.

And thousands had sunk on the ground overpowered,

The weary to sleep and the wounded to die."

"My God, Powell! there is only one person I ever knew who could play like that on the bugle, could play that air, and—tell me! who is that bugler?"

The words at first in amazement uttered, changed almost fiercely as he asked the question.

"It is the Boy Bugler of your own regiment—Billy Blew," answered Powell, struck with the manner of Fred Forrester and remembering the scene upon the parade-ground.

"Billy Blew, the Boy Bugler—ah! that boy I saw, with his startling face."
 "Powell, will you do me a favor?"
 "Willingly."
 "I wish to know who it was that played that unforgotten air, for I knew one that played it just the same way."
 "Will you kindly send that Boy Bugler to me, now?"
 "Certainly; and I will drop in later to see you, and bring a nerve tonic I wish you to take."
 And the kind surgeon went on his errand, and soon after the Boy Bugler entered the quarters of Fred Forrester.

CHAPTER XXXV.
 IN THE NET.

I WILL now return to Buffalo Bill, whom I left in the camp of the Brimstone Brotherhood in the Spirit Canyon.
 As he rode up with the four men who had been his captors, his horse, dress and appearance generally indicated that he was none other than Brick Benson, the Deserter Sergeant.
 Then, too, there was his brand, of a red torch-holder with blue flame, and the number, One, on his mask, to indicate to the outlaw that he was the trusty messenger whom he had sent to the village of Snow Face, the renegade white chief.

The scout dismounted quietly, led his horse a few paces away and staked him out, and returned to the tent of the outlaw chief.

He had not taken the bit out of the horse's mouth, nor had he unsaddled him, while he had shortened the lariat.

The place where he staked him out was just where the canyon turned, and there was a clump of timber beyond through which the trail ran.

In his belt the scout had loosened his revolvers, and both of them were cocked, for a second of time might be a life to him.

His quick glance had shown him that the outlaws had their horses further away in the canyon, and the four who had returned with Buffalo Bill had already put their animals out to feed, unsaddling and unbridling them.

One had offered to take the scout's horse, but he had said he would look after him, when he had had a talk with the chief.

So quietly did Buffalo Bill make his arrangements for a sudden dash, if he found need of it, that not even the chief observed aught strange, and in fact no one now held suspicion of the scout's being a spy in the camp.

But Buffalo Bill had planned for all that might occur.

Captain Brimstone might recognize him, something might occur to arouse suspicion, and in that case there was but one thing to do, kill the chief and fly for his life.

He had been on the search of the trails in the neighborhood for a week, and learned the country well.

He had, by night, on foot, been almost into the canyon, so he was prepared for a flight, or a fight.

He walked up to the tent of Captain Brimstone, and took the hand extended to him.

"Benson, my friend, I am glad to see you back, for I was getting very anxious about you," he said in an earnest way.

"Why so, chief?"

"I thought that perhaps Snow Face had scalped you, or his braves had ambushed you?"

"They did, but got the worst of it."

"Ah! then your mission was a failure?"

"Oh, no, for I did not let the Sioux know I was forced to kill two of their braves."

"You see I resemble Buffalo Bill so very much, I looked for trouble, and to be on guard against ambush, I put a dummy in my saddle, and walked behind my horse."

"You are a smart one, Benson."

"Thank you, chief, I only have to out-Indian Indian you know, sir."

"And you did?"

"Two red-skins put holes into my dummy, see here are the wounds, for I dressed my blankets up in my coat, and as they sprung for the scalp, with a string I pulled the dummy out of the saddle, and simply shot them."

"Good! but you were lucky to think of your cunning scheme."

"Now tell me if you saw Snow Face?"

"I did, and gave him your letter, sir, and he has written one in return."

"I see; give it to me, please."

The chief took the letter and read it through, and then asked:

"Did you see him open my letter?"

"I did, sir."

"And read it?"

"Yes."

"Did he seem surprised?"

"He certainly started when he saw the writing and at what he read in the letter, chief."

"He then wrote this to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he says he will be my ally, and asks when I intend to visit him, or retreat to his country, to send a courier on ahead that he may notify all of his hunting-parties."

"Yes, it would be wisest, sir, for the Sioux

are hard to make understand that some pale-faces are their friends and others their foes."

"They will understand my friendship better when I have sent them some plunder, which I will do."

"But you have done well, Benson, to go to the Sioux camps."

"Better remember to call me by my number."

"True, I'll bear it in mind; but let me know more of Snow Face."

"What more would you know, sir?"

"He is the real chief of the Sioux?"

"Yes, sir."

"And they obey him as such?"

"Oh, yes, they regard him as a superior being."

"How many braves has he?"

"Quite a large force."

"And his stronghold is a safe one?"

"Oh, yes, he could defend it against an army."

"Benson—I mean Number One?"

"Yes, chief."

"How does Snow Face live?"

"He has a cabin for his home, and his numerous raids have enabled him to furnish it most comfortably."

"Are there no white captives in his village?"

"I saw no captives, sir."

"Another question?"

"Yes, sir, all you please."

"You were in his cabin?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is he married?"

"I saw no Indian wife, sir, if he had any."

"I did not mean an Indian wife."

"With all the charges against Snow Face, chief, of wrong-doing, I have never heard of his taking white women captive to his village, though to men he is merciless."

Captain Brimstone gave a sigh of relief, and so did the scout, for he had cleverly fenced off the queries of the outlaw, whose words told him that he had a suspicion certainly that there was a white woman in the village of the Sioux.

"I had heard that Snow Face had a beautiful white captive with him, Number One, and I am glad to know such is not the case, as you say he has none."

"Rumors are often sent to the fort that there are white captives among the Indians, and I have always made it my duty to get at the truth."

"Rumors sent to the fort—and you have made it your duty to discover the truth?"

The words were sharply uttered, and it was evident that the chief was suddenly made suspicious, and his words called the scout to a realization of what he had said; but he coolly returned:

"Yes, sir, for you remember I was a soldier, and am a deserter."

"Ah, yes, but you startled me when you spoke of the fort."

"You know I must be so careful, in the life I lead, and I do not know who to trust, and am constantly in dread of finding a spy among my men."

"Do you think any man would take such risks, chief, as to come here?"

"Buffalo Bill would, in a minute."

The scout gave the credit to Captain Brimstone of hitting the truth dead center; but before more was said, Number Two came to the tent and called the chief aside.

That he was the subject of conversation, Buffalo Bill knew, and he saw that something had gone wrong; but he prepared for the worst, come as it might.

CHAPTER XXXVI.
 UNDER SUSPICION.

SOON after the arrival of Buffalo Bill in the rendezvous of the Brimstone Brotherhood, one of the members of the band rode into the canyon.

He headed for the chief's tent, but halted at Buffalo Bill's horse, and dismounting got down and examined his hoof-track carefully.

Then he moved on to the tent, and seeing that the chief was occupied, rode on to the other camps and dismounted.

Calling Number Two to him, he led him apart and said:

"Pard, who were ther last pilgrim thet come in?"

"A party of us come together."

"I means ther galoot whose hoss are yonder up ther canyon?"

"Ah, that are Number One."

"I see; but has yer seen his face?"

"I hev, and does yer know thar was four of us together, and we seen him coming, and so laid fer him, fer his face wasn't masked then, and we thought we had caught Buffalo Bill."

"And yer did?"

"No, though he are powerful like him."

"You bet he are, fer he are Buffalo Bill himself."

"No he ain't."

"I say he be."

"So did we say so, but he are ther man as is known in these parts as ther Sergeant Deserter."

"Nary."

"I say he be."

"I knows ther Sergeant Deserter, for we was tergether in Denver, and I knows Buffalo Bill too, you bet, fer he were ther cause o' havin' thet same pricked inter my hand thet yer sees thar," and the man held forth his right hand, on which were the words, pricked into the skin in red india-ink:

"THIEF AND MURDERER."

"Lordy, pard, thet are a hard brand ter bear."

"You bet it are, and some day I are going to brand ther face o' Buffalo Bill with just one word to git my revenge."

"And what are thet?" asked Number One, interested in the man whom he only knew by the number on his mask.

"DEATH!" was the savage reply.

"Well, he are a dangerous man for our crowd; but yer is off regardin' thet stranger."

"I hain't."

"I knows yer is."

"How does yer know it?"

"Why, we was a-scoutin', accordin' ter Cap'n Brimstone's orders, and we tuk yonder pilgrim fer Buffalo Bill, and we dropped our ropes onter him and tuk him in right slick."

"But he sprung his mask onter us, and it are Number One, and he told us as how ther cap'n hed sent him up to ther Sioux villages, so as we c'd be friends with Snow Face, ef we got down too hard."

"And he went?"

"He did."

"Who says so?"

"Why ther cap'n and ther renegade chief, as I understands it, are pards, and so he writ him a letter."

"Did he bring a letter back with him?"

"He did."

"How does yer know?"

"I seen him give ther cap'n a letter."

"Waal, it may be thet I are mistaken, but I guesses as I hain't, and I has a way o' findin' out."

"As how, Number Six?"

"Yer say he are ther Sergeant Deserter?"

"Yas."

"Brick Benson are his name."

"So it be, fer when he found we hed him, he owned up who he were, thet we should know, and he are about ther only man in camp I guesses, as any o' us knows who he be."

"Maybe."

"Ther chief is onter all o' us, of course; but durned ef I knows you, Pard Six."

"Nor does I know you, Pard Two; but I does know that Number One are Buffalo Bill."

"As how?"

"Waal, I think so, and ef I proves he hain't ther Deserter Sergeant, then he are bound ter be Buffalo Bill, hain't he?"

"Sart'in, fer ther Almighty hain't made three men so much alike, and sich men too."

"But what does yer intend ter do, pard?"

"I are going to ther chief and call him out."

"Then I shall hev a talk with him, telling him just what I hev did ther last week, since he sent me on a scout."

"He sent yer scoutin' too, pard, did he?"

"For sure, and I are been on one trail thet I think are goin' ter pan out great."

"Yer see we lives with a rope round our necks, and it are but right we should know our friends, from our foes, and, ef there are any spies in camp we wants ter know it afore we gits a rope about our necks ter choke us."

"You bet we does!"

"Now, I are a miser'bul sinner, and I hes did jist what this brand in my hand do say, kill and steal, and I don't want ter attend no hangin'-match whar I furnishes ther rope-fruit, don't yer see, and therefore I intends ter know jist how right I are."

"Yer bet, and I wants ter know, too."

"Waal, yer soon will, fer I are going ter tell ther chief what I knows, and ef he are ther Deserter Sergeant, then I are ther man as kin tell it, fer my pard hed a hand as I remembers."

"And ef he hain't ther Deserter Sergeant?"

"Then he be Buffalo Bill."

"Sart'in."

"And ef so, pard, then ther Brimstones open up ther biz big with a hangin' festival, at which it will be hands all 'round, pards, ter see ther fun."

So saying Number Six went toward the chief's tent to see if Number One was the Deserter Sergeant in reality, or Buffalo Bill in disguise.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BRANDED.

It was Number Six who came to the tent and called Captain Brimstone aside, as he was talking with the scout.

Buffalo Bill intuitively felt that something had gone wrong.

He had seen the man come up the canyon, then halt at his horse, and next go over to the camps.

His conversation with Number Two was in full sight of where he sat, and so when the outlaw came to the chief's quarters and called him aside, the scout knew that there was a crisis at hand.

are many things which have puzzled and worried me in the past. What worries me may do more than that to one we love and ought to venerate. If you know more than I, give me light so I may work for him to the best advantage."

In the hour of trouble the human heart reaches out for sympathy, for one to help bear the burdens of life. It was so with Ruth, and, being fully aware that no one was more loyal or devoted than her brother, she determined to break the silence which had been upon her, and put him so he could intelligently give her help to guard the old general.

Hurriedly, tersely but plainly she told the truth about the lost papers, as far as she knew it, and, also, all she had discovered since Agent Benson's death.

Ralph, scarcely able to believe what he knew before, was amazed, now. Dismay was on his face.

"This is horrible!" he murmured, when she was done.

"If he has done wrong it was not when he was in his right mind."

"Surely not."

"He must be in serious mental trouble."

"One thing is sure, he was not the user of the sword."

"No."

Ruth tried to speak confidently, but she forgot nothing, and the fear in her mind did not abate. If Nathaniel Huntress was capable of lapse in one direction, why was he not in another?

"It is for us to save him," pursued Ralph.

"Give me your hand on it!"

"Amen! May our wits be equal to the test!"

CHAPTER XXI.

"DOES HE SUSPECT?"

THE following morning General Huntress was in condition to meet the family at the table. Ruth was soon with him. Her fear that he would show mental disturbance was not confirmed, but he was weak and weary. All this indicated the need of a physician, and the family attendant was called in.

The man of medicine had not failed to hear of the occurrences at the house, so far as they had been made public, and he was not long in diagnosing the case.

"Mental worry!" was the verdict. "He will be all right as soon as the worry is over."

Easily said, but Ruth felt how hopeless the case was unless something in the way of a miracle occurred. What had they to hope in the way of a change for the better?

However, it was something to know there was no immediate danger, and when the physician was gone she set about doing what she could to carry out his directions for relief. She was interrupted in the midst of her work by an announcement from a servant:

"Mr. Royal Rock is in the parlor. He asked to see the general, and when I told him that he was ill, he said he wished to see you."

Ominous visitor! Ruth did not know how much or how little the representative of the law had discovered, but she regarded him as an enemy to her father. Thinking thus, she hated Royal Rock.

She sent word that she would see him, and soon took her way in the direction of the parlor. She dreaded the interview. "The Detective Conqueror" they called Rock, and she had a vague notion that he might be able to read minds as well as events, so that his very presence was a menace and a fear to her.

He received her with the politeness so characteristic of him, but she was no more cordial than circumstances made imperatively necessary.

"I had called to see General Huntress," he explained, "but I am told he is ill."

"He is—too ill to be seen, I regret to say."

"I am sorry to hear that. I trust it is nothing serious?"

"He has been so harassed by this investigation, and so besieged with interviews, that he is really ill from it. What he needs now, and must have," added Ruth, boldly, "is rest, in the full sense of the word."

"Quite right. You should spare him all annoyance, and see that his nerves have a chance to recover their usual tension."

Ruth looked hard at the speaker. She did not know what to make of the apparently friendly advice.

"At his age one is not so much proof against fatigue and its attendant evils as at yours."

"No," Ruth admitted.

"I hope, however, he is able to see me?" pursued Rock.

"Unfortunately, he is not, but," she diplomatically added, "I will do what I can to fill his place."

"Very well," calmly answered the detective. "I have some new evidence, and I wished to present it to a member of your family. I have learned positively that Benson entered this house on the night he was slain."

Startling announcement! Had the servant girl proved false to her trust and spread her tidings still further?

Ruth felt a catch in her breath which was so strong as to be almost overpowering, and if she had not been schooling herself for this, or some similar crisis, she must have betrayed all in her manner. Fortunately, the schooling had been hers, and her natural courage stood her in good service.

Keen was the gaze which the detective conqueror bent upon her, but even he saw nothing to reward him. Surprise, only, was to be seen.

"Impossible!" she exclaimed.

"And why impossible?"

"We should have known of it."

"It does seem so."

Ruth believed there was an insinuation in the reply, but she did not waver. Fully prepared, now, to face the danger, she went on with the most natural air imaginable:

"None of our family saw him, and we have perfectly reliable help. Pray, how did you get such news?"

"From a man who happened to be on the street."

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"Then what proof have you of his good faith?"

Royal Rock felt like smiling. Her logical and ready way of meeting the point aroused his hearty admiration, if it did not please him. He could appreciate skill in others, even if it did conflict with his own success.

"Whatever proof is lacking must be secured by me," the detective returned. "The man is sincere, I fully believe. He has put me on the track, and it is what I needed. Now, Miss Huntress, can you suggest nothing?"

"How can I? I should be glad to give you aid, but I am sure you are on the wrong track. I have, as I said, fullest faith in our servants, and if one of them had admitted Mr. Benson I should know of it. I have myself questioned them, and I assure you they have told the truth. Your theory is wrong!"

Firmly she met Royal Rock's gaze.

"Then how did Benson get where he was?"

"Clearly, by some other house."

"Do you think so?"

"I have no doubt on the subject."

"Then he took an erratic course."

"I do not know as to that. Do not understand me as trying to form opinions for you, Mr. Rock, but I cannot believe ill of our servants."

Ruth was gracious, and no one could object to her having opinions of her own. It is the privilege of all women, and especially of those gifted with beauty and brilliancy.

Rock did not object audibly, but he was not convinced. He failed to measure Ruth fully. Accustomed as he was to analyzing men and women he could not for the life of him tell whether she was sincere or not. He had gained doubts of the whole household which made him prone to suspect much, but decide as to her good faith, or lack thereof, he could not.

There was only one thing to do, and that was to make the best of a situation far from pleasing, and as it must be done, it was done gracefully. He spoke well and prepared to depart.

"I am very sorry if I have disappointed you, Mr. Rock," said Ruth, sweetly. "No

one is more anxious than I to see this matter settled in a satisfactory manner. It is a horror to all of us, and it must remain so until the doubt and the mystery is removed."

"Naturally."

"We cannot know one moment of peace until this is over. Even you, with all your experience, can gain no adequate idea of what it is to be thus situated. Oh! if we could help you!"

She clasped her hands and looked so sweetly overwhelmed with sorrow that it seemed she must move the man of law.

"All may end well, Miss Huntress," he reminded.

"True."

"Since we give up the theory that Benson was seen to enter, what would you suggest now?"

Ruth's gaze did not waver, but she experienced more doubt than ever before.

"A trap!" she thought, quickly. "It is not natural he should consult me."

Aloud, she answered:

"I feel that my opinions are of but little weight, but you are experienced in this line. I beg of you to use all your skill, and constant attention, and try to solve the secret which must annoy us so much until fully unraveled."

"This I will do, and I hope all will result so you will be cleared of your worry and trouble."

It was one of the sincere things said at the interview, for though every step of the way had tended to make the detective believe there was some one in the house who had guilty knowledge of the theft and the murder, he had no ill will toward the Huntress family.

Ruth thanked him in due form, and then he went away.

Left alone, Ruth wondered:

"Have I averted suspicion? Let me hope so for my father's sake—"

She stopped short. Despite her strongest endeavors to believe in Nathaniel Huntress she found herself constantly acting and reasoning as if he had more to fear than the discovery of the truth in regard to the Government papers.

"I will not think of it!" she decided, firmly. "He is innocent, and I insult him by supposing otherwise."

Meanwhile, Rock was thinking:

"Well parried! She would make one feel convinced if there was nothing else to call for suspicion. She defended well. Was it the natural desire of an innocent woman to shield her family from scandal, or the cunning of one with guilty knowledge?"

He walked on in deep thought until his home was reached. Then he went in, meditating:

"I work in the dark. The light is to be found in the Huntress house, but how shall I throw the beams of revelation on the mystery? How shall I get what those enlightened will not tell me?"

CHAPTER XXII.

TWO ARE ACCUSED.

NATHANIEL HUNTRESS was not so ill as his daughter would have the Detective Conqueror think. Shortly after the latter went away the general sent a servant to request Maude Hollywood to come to his private room. She obeyed promptly, her face as radiant as usual.

"My dear general!" she cried, "I trust you are much improved. It is sad to think of all our campaigning on the border ending so dully. Long live the republic! and may our days be renewed—"

"Madam, pray omit all reference to that subject!" requested Huntress, curtly.

"Pardon me; I forgot that I had orders, and that you were a military despot. I am silent."

A deep sigh accompanied the assertion. It pained Maude to think she could not boil over with enthusiasm even in the solitude of that room.

"I had called you on business," the general resumed.

"Ah! Good! I am at your service. Pray proceed!"

"About Benson."

"Luckless man! We mourn his loss!"
 "Do you?"
 "Do I not?"
 "Some one does not."
 "Meaning his slayer?"
 "Exactly."
 "You may be right; very likely you are; though it seems to me the wretch must repent of having put such an excellent man out of the world. We can live but one life, and to violently deprive us of that is a horrible thing. Would not the conscience of any one who could do harm to such a good man sting him with the serpent lash of a thousand mental horrors?"
 "Mrs. Hollywood, you are not sincere!"
 "No?"
 "No. Don't let us—you and I—try to deceive each other. You are not one to feel deep sympathy for anybody. I well remember how coolly you saw men die on the border and never shed a tear. True, you said you were sorry, but you did not act it. Benson was a menace to you and me, and you have no regrets."
 "Saint Catherine! how can a comrade say this!" and Maude turned her eyes toward the ceiling as if looking for an answer there.
 "Madam, I have theories in this case!" declared Huntress, with gravity.
 "Excellent! What are they?"
 "You know more of the murder than you will admit!"
 "I?"
 "You!"
 Huntress leaned forward and fixed his keenest gaze upon the woman's face, but she bore the scrutiny well. Not by the wavering of a muscle did she betray guilt.
 "Well, I like that!" she cried, airily.
 "You would make me out an ally of assassins!"
 "Somebody knows how Benson died."
 "Yes; that is undoubtedly true, but do you think I am that somebody?"
 "Who had a motive to kill him?"
 "I know of nobody but yourself!" retorted Maude.
 "I did not do the deed," calmly answered Huntress. "Now, be frank with me! Benson indirectly menaced you as well as myself. Did you not remove him?"
 "Worse yet! So you think I was the prime factor? Maybe you also believe I struck the blow?"
 "I do!"
 The general made the declaration promptly, and then bent a sharp gaze upon the woman. If it was not intended to be one of searching scrutiny it was well feigned.
 "Comrade, you have gone crazy! In no other way can I account for your wild idea. Did not the officers say the blow was dealt by a strong hand?"
 "You are not weak. You have a large bony wrist and an arm of muscle as well as flesh. Wielded by you a good weapon would go home with telling power. I think you amply strong enough to have done the deed!"
 "Well, suppose I did—which I did not—what then? I must have had a motive. Why should I kill him?"
 "Because you and I were likely to rise or fall together. As partners in crime our interests were mutual. You had as much to gain by his death as I."
 "Indeed!"
 "Do not misunderstand my motive in referring to this matter," the general went on. "You and I cannot afford to be too nice about things when we are menaced by peril such as we are in. It is nothing to me whether you killed Benson or not, but this I wish to say: If you did it is to my interests, as well as yours, that the fact should be kept secret. We rise or fall together. You need not tell me all directly, but, if you give me a hint, I shall be able to work more to your interests than I can do when in the dark. Give me that hint, and let me do all I can for you."
 Earnestly the argument was made, but Maude did not seem to feel favorably impressed. She regarded her companion closely.
 "You wish me to tell all I know, eh?"
 "Yes."
 "I will!"
 "It is better so."
 "You may be right."

"Proceed!"
 "Well, the person who killed Benson was—"
 Breathlessly the general exclaimed:
 "Who?"
 "Yourself!"
 "I?"
 "Nathaniel Huntress, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" cried the adventuress, her eyes flashing with unwonted feeling.
 "Here I have been holding my tongue with heroic fortitude, never lisping a word to anybody, but when you seek to make an old comrade bear the burden of your sins it is time to call a halt. Who killed Benson? Well, comrade, if you don't know nobody ever will!"
 "Woman, do you mean to insinuate—"
 "Of course I mean it was you!"
 Maude was direct in her charges, but she did not seem to care a picayune who did the killing or, indeed, whether it was done at all. She spoke as if she intended to end a false accusation against herself, however.
 "Ridiculous!" exclaimed General Huntress. "Do you seek in this way to divert suspicion from your own sins?"
 "My dear sir, if you demur suppose we call in Royal Rock as an arbitrator, and have him decide between us?"
 Huntress's expression changed.
 "We do not want to do anything so absurd as that, of course. Do not misunderstand me. I beg of you; I would not think of blaming you in such a crisis, but the exigencies of the occasion demand unceasing vigilance, and I could help you better if I knew the truth."
 "Take it, then! I did not kill Benson or have any hand in it. I don't know who did do it, but I don't think you need any help. Now, let us drop this talk; I have had enough of it!"
 For the first time in his life the general saw Maude really angry, and he dealt with her accordingly.
 "If I have offended I beg your pardon, for I did not intend to do anything of the sort. I make no accusation against you, and your declaration leaves me all in the dark. I did not do harm to Benson, nor do I know who did. I could think of no one but you. Let me now withdraw all references to it, and assure you of my sincere good will."
 Some women might have thought him insincere and proceeded accordingly, but if Maude had any such suspicion she did not betray the fact.
 "Old comrade, give me your hand!" she cried, in her usual airy fashion. "'Twas our first quarrel, and I think it will be our last."
 Their hands crossed. How much of sincerity was in either mind it would not have been easy for an outsider to tell. When partners in crime fall out there is not likely to be much good will between them thereafter.
 "Tell me if there is anything new in this great case," requested Maude, presently.
 "Nothing, I think."
 "There never will be. The dogs of law are not so sharp as they think they are."
 "Don't be too sure of that."
 "What does Sheldon amount to? Our dear Ruth has him in the hollow of her fair hand. As for Royal Rock—"
 She paused and shrugged her shoulders as a fit ending of the sentence. She flattered herself she had Rock in the same way.
 "They gain nothing," she went on, "yet Benson's blood is not avenged. Queer how he went off the stage!"
 She bent her gaze upon the general, and it was not hard to see that she did not think it so very queer.
 "Unlucky Benson!" murmured Huntress.
 "Yes, but were I a detective I should find out who killed him in short order!" and her emphatic nod was not to be mistaken.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WITH THE KNIFE-MEN.

ROYAL ROCK did not forget "Adam Snow" and his other acquaintances of the old house to which he had tracked Adam when the latter tried to take his life, and he soon carried out his resolution to visit the place

again. To do this he first saw the policeman on the beat and then had it arranged with the servant girl so he could work his will so far as getting admission to the house was concerned.
 One evening at nine o'clock he reached the house, being accompanied to the door by the policeman.
 There they parted and he went in with no company but the girl.
 "You will have to be very cautious, sir," she warned.
 "Why?"
 "Those men would not hesitate to kill you if they found you acting the spy on them."
 Judging by what Adam had tried to do Rock thought this very likely to be true, but he gravely asked:
 "Why do you think that?"
 "Because they are that kind of persons. They are not vicious in private life, but when they see their ends menaced in any way, they do not let life stand in their way!"
 "What is their great purpose in life?—for they must have one."
 "If I were in their confidence enough to know I should not betray them to the extent of letting you in."
 She spoke with some pride, and then added:
 "I only know they are Mexicans, and mixed up in some way with the war which has just ended down there. I cannot tell more, for it's all I have learned of them."
 It was all he could expect, and Royal thanked her and went carefully up the stairs to try and get more from their own lips.
 His former refuge gave him shelter, and from that he soon gained view of the gang. Several men were present, though the number did not include Adam. They were smoking and playing some game of cards which was new to him.
 This was all they did for half an hour, and the wait began to grow tiresome. It was broken as much to his taste as he could desire.
 Footsteps sounded and another man entered the room. It was Adam. In a moment the card-playing was suspended and all the Mexicans looked at the new-comer.
 "What luck?" one of the number cried.
 Adam threw his hat down on the floor with a viciousness which was in itself an answer.
 "None!" he then sententiously responded.
 "Has he escaped you?"
 "I did not see him at all."
 "Bad luck!"
 "I know not where he was, but I could not get eyes on him, and as time went on I saw how useless it was for me to plan to that end, so I came home."
 "I am sorry he has not been settled," declared the man who had been so eager for hostilities on the former occasion.
 "So am I, Pedro, but what could I do? It would have been folly to remain where I was and invite attention to myself."
 "Right; you did well to leave."
 "I will see Mr. Royal Rock again," added Adam, significantly. "I have been selected to do this work and I will not falter therein. He shall die!"
 "Good!"
 The party voiced their sentiment as one.
 "It is a righteous cause," Adam resumed. "We are no band of outlaws, assassins or thugs; we have no union except as honest men devoted to the good of our country. As such I will do and dare!"
 Again he was applauded.
 "What is the latest news?" Adam inquired.
 "None."
 "Rock is very busy at Nathaniel Huntress's house."
 "We could earn a pretty penny in that cause. How easy it would be for us to suggest who killed the general's friend, Benson!"
 "But we could not prove it."
 "True; but the truth would come out if suspicion was once started. Dull, indeed, would be the man who could not guess the truth if we were to announce the facts in our possession. Suppose we were to say: 'Nathaniel Huntress was a traitor to the United States on the border in that he put his sympathies with the revolutionists—'"

"Hush!"

"We are safe here. Let us not fear to talk. I would add, if I went to the police, that Huntress was bound to the revolutionists by the promise of large areas of land in Mexico if he worked for their good, and that he kept the promise well."

"But vainly."

"True, and that it was which brought him all his trouble. I would say, further, that the reason he forgot to leave the Government papers in Washington, when he came East, was that he dared not have his superiors see how he dealt with the rival factions on the border, and this would explain the mysterious disappearance of the papers when the War Department called for them. Mysterious? Bah! Huntress was the thief who took them from his desk!"

Royal Rock was listening breathlessly.

He had not thought to get such news as this.

"We shall never tell this to the New York police!" remarked Pedro, indifferently.

"Hardly! If Huntress goes down we might get hurt too!"

For the first time Adam smiled. It was not a pleasant smile; his parted lips revealed his teeth as a wolf shows his fangs.

"Do you think the investigators are making any progress?" Pedro asked.

"I know not, but I do not credit them with the cunning they are said to possess."

"I fear that Rock!" declared a new speaker.

"Ah! but Adam is on his track."

"He was a while ago, and Rock got the best of the argument."

Adam muttered an emphatic comment.

"Go try him yourself, if you do not like my word!" he then retorted.

"Ah! but I will let you do it."

"We are all satisfied with what you have done, Adam," averred the leader. "We do not cavil in the least. Only keep it up and all will be well. If Rock goes on he is pretty sure to learn all. If he was at all languid before he will be so no longer, with a murder to spur him on. Singular that nobody suspects it was Huntress who killed Benson."

"How do you know they do not?"

"It has not been suspected or mentioned in the newspapers."

"Did you ever know a newspaper to go against a rich man unless it was to satisfy a personal grudge?"

"No."

"Well, it must have been Huntress who killed Benson. He let him into the house, himself, doubtless, and then settled all danger of the agent learning about the theft. Oh! these soldiers are hot-blooded fellows, and once let them get to going and there is the dickens to pay. Benson found him so."

"Yet he may not have been killed by the general."

"Then it was one of Huntress's tools who did it. Rest assured of that."

"It was Huntress who saw the vital necessity of getting him out of the way. The Mexican drama must be hushed up."

Royal Rock listened to all this with closest attention. He saw that the men were proceeding merely upon theory, but they certainly had good grounds for their suspicions if what they had to say about the affair on the Southwest border was true, and the detective saw no reason to doubt that. Why should they deceive themselves on any point?

He was glad he had come to the house this night.

"Huntress is bound to ruin himself," the conversation went on. "It was a mighty risky thing to do when he took Maude Hollywood into his house. Let any of them go down on the border and see what she is. It would be told to them that there is not a more confirmed and unscrupulous political plotter than she is."

"The general simply made a bid for his own destruction when he took her in, since her character must be found out, which would advertise him to all New York."

"Probably she demanded a refuge and he dared not refuse."

"Very likely."

"We want to get away from the city before the blow falls. Hasten your work, each one who has any to do, and we will flee from the wrath to come."

"There is still no clue to Lucio Cano," grumbled one of the party.

"Persevere!"

"My knife is sharpened for him!"

"Look to the man as well as the knife."

"Yes, for of all men Cano is the one most eagerly sought by us," added the leader. "Strange how we lost him before. We seemed almost to have our hands on him when he so mysteriously disappeared. Where did he go?"

"Suppose," suggested a man heretofore silent, "that Huntress gave him shelter, too?"

"The idea is wild!" declared Adam, and there was a chorus to back up his opinion.

Just then there was a touch on Royal Rock's shoulder.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LIFE AT STAKE.

THE detective turned quickly. It might be that the person who had touched him was the servant, but he did not take that view of the matter, and if it was any one else it must be an enemy.

First sight confirmed that last opinion. Two strange men were there, both of whom had the swarthy complexion so characteristic of the party he was shadowing.

Dark and scowling were the faces which confronted him.

"What are you doing here?" one of the two demanded.

It was a hard question to answer to the satisfaction of all, but Royal Rock made the best of the chance and returned:

"I was looking for a friend, but I do not see him here?"

"You take a peculiar way of finding him."

"I merely looked into the room to see if he was there."

"I believe you are a liar!"

"Sir?"

"Men in search of friends do not act the spy. That is what you are doing. Until you can give a good account of yourself you are our prisoner!"

He put out his hand, but Rock avoided the touch.

"Don't go too fast!" he retorted. "I allow no one to talk to me as you try to do. Keep to yourself, or it will be the worse for you. Who are you that dictates to me? Keep off or there will be trouble here!"

"It has begun now!"

The swarthy man did not seem inclined to make many words. He made a forward rush and essayed to seize the detective. Rock knew that half-way measures would avoid nothing then, and he acted accordingly. With a skillful blow he laid the foremost enemy flat on his back and then turned to flee, but he was not to get off so easily. Man Number Two raised his voice in a call for help; then he leaped at the detective in turn.

Rock was taken at the wrong moment. He was using all his effort to pass, and was not in good condition to repel or break the force of such a shock.

Both fell heavily to the floor.

Not yet was the determined detective done, and by quick work he succeeded in getting to the top. Victory would soon have been his, but the alarm now had its effect.

The door opened hurriedly and all the Mexicans were there to oppose him.

He who had been placed at the bottom of the fight again made himself heard:

"A spy!—a spy!" he cried. "Catch him!"

Rock writhed away, but the delay had been disastrous. All these men were accustomed to just such crises and to quick effort. As one person they leaped to the attack, and the intruder was grasped by many hands.

The latter did not lose his courage, and the fight was kept up with vigor, but he had to deal with numbers too great for his powers. Not only was the force of muscle too great to be resisted, but he was hemmed in by a solid mass of flesh.

Suddenly he ceased all effort and stood passive.

"Well, gentlemen, what next?" he asked.

His perfect coolness silenced them for a moment, but Adam soon found power of speech.

"It is Rock, the detective!" he cried, exultantly.

The other men looked in amazement. They would as soon have thought to see the president of the Mexican republic there. But Adam could not keep back his words of joy.

"He has come to us, instead of our having to go to him, and the battle is over. Victory, victory is ours! Saint Catherine be praised! We win the fight!"

The leader began to recover from his surprise.

"Take him into the room!" he ordered.

Rock went meekly. It would do no good to resist, and he was philosopher enough to accept the inevitable coolly.

The Mexicans could hardly realize their own good fortune, but when they had had a consultation with Adam, and he had reasserted that the celebrated Royal Rock was, indeed, in their power, they began to see what the capture meant.

The leader addressed the detective:

"What are you doing here?"

"Watching you!" candidly replied the detective.

"Watching us?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I was interested in your plans to kill me."

"You will be more interested, soon!" declared Adam.

"Have you listened to our talk?" the leader asked.

"I have."

"Then you know we have doomed you?"

"I do."

"Saint Catherine! you take it calmly!"

"Why not? Like you, I am a soldier of fortune. Would you let such a small thing as life or death stand in the way of your plans? I believe not. Man can die but once. When he does he may as well do it manfully. You and I are not enemies; we simply differ on small things. It seems that my calling—my legitimate business—conflicts with yours. Hence, you are justified in slaying me. I do not blame you. I only hope you will turn me off in a fashion suitable to a man of courage. Let me die facing the doer of the deed!"

Royal Rock stood erect and talked as quietly as if he were discussing the arrangements for a dinner. He had every eye upon him, and each face expressed the same feeling.

Adventurers though they were, these men admired such remarkable nerve. They had not lost respect for heroism.

"You refer to death with composure," muttered the leader, at last.

"Why not? It is the fate of all. Man can die but once, and when his time comes he may as well make the best of it. Death? Why, it is no more than the last act of life. We sink into our nightly slumber with coolness. Why not to our last sleep?"

"Is life so worthless to you?"

"Far from it. I have work to do which no hands but mine can do. It is not pleasant to leave it undone when I take my departure from the earth, but so it was ordained from the beginning, and we must accept the decrees of fate."

"Perhaps you hope to escape?" suggested the leader, suspiciously.

Rock shrugged his shoulders.

"No one knows I am here, and what have I to hope for against so many?"

"True; you must die!"

"I realize it."

"You made a big mistake when you undertook to act the spy on us."

"No; it was the line of my duty, and the work and the consequences are alike a matter-of-fact occurrences."

"What do you know of us?"

"Only what I have heard from your own lips, and that is not much. It seems you are gentlemen, and only acting now from a political, or other sense of duty. This makes it easier for me, for I can appreciate a patriot and a gentleman. If all men could die under as favorable circumstances they would be lucky."

The band were staggered. The frankness and calm composure of this prisoner were amazing even to soldiers of fortune. They never had heard any one talk thus before. If the compliment of the last few words had any meaning under the surface it was so veiled by his air of resignation that they did not suspect it.

"It's a pity you are not in better work," declared the leader, impulsively.

"How could I be? Adam Snow, yonder, came to kill me. It must have been repugnant to his sense of fitness, but he did not shrink. Why? Because it was a call to duty. So with me; I had been doing my duty, and even if I was hunting *you* I could not be in better work."

There was a murmur of approval. This was a doctrine the band could comprehend.

"Yet, you must die!"

"So must you; so must all."

"But you are young."

"Yes; and death will prevent me from ever being old and decrepit; from being despised for the weakness of age."

"Truly, you are a philosopher!"

"At least, you will not find me afraid to die. Let it be facing the slayer. Promise me that!"

"I will; I do!"

"Thank you!"

Royal Rock reached out his hand, and as the Mexican surrendered his own it was cordially clasped.

"Now I am ready," announced the detective.

"Are you in haste?"

"Of course I await your convenience, but there is no more I wish to say. Arrange it as you will, however."

The leader shook his head and looked at his fellows. None of them had anything to say, so he called two of the party aside and talked with them long and earnestly. Rock looked around for a chair, found one, and then took out a cigar, lighted it, and began to smoke.

He was watched with wondering attention.

Such coolness, wholly unmixed with bravado or defiance, was new to their experience, brave as they were, themselves.

The consultation among the leading spirits was not over until many minutes had passed. There did not seem to be a unanimity of opinion, and this had brought about a discussion the nature of which could only be imagined.

One who did a good deal of imagining was Royal Rock. He watched them sharply without seeming to do so, for on their decision much—his life, perhaps, depended. And he was full of solicitude. He was not by any means so reconciled to dying as he had claimed. He had been playing a game, and it was with the keenest suspense he waited the result.

Would it be life or death?

CHAPTER XXV.

THE LIFE-HUNTER

AFTER a long pause the leader of the Mexicans turned to Royal Rock's side.

"What do you know of us?" he demanded, abruptly.

"Practically nothing," the detective answered.

"We tried to kill you."

"Yes, but I bear you no ill will. I heard you say it was a matter of self preservation, and not any low feud. I can't forgive the man who would kill me, but I recognize the difference between a ruffian and men with a great purpose such as I have heard you claim. Go on with your killing, and—"

"Suppose we don't want to kill you?" demanded the leader, quickly.

Royal allowed himself to look greatly surprised.

"Why, in such a case I should not blame you!" he admitted, drily.

The leader laughed aloud, and the sound was echoed by nearly all present. This prisoner, with his matchless nerve was growing interesting to all.

Presently the leader added:

"We don't want to kill you!"

"By Jove! now I think of it I don't want you should! Of course I am not entitled to vote in this case, but if you decide to let me off, you can rely upon me not to blackball the decision."

"We had rather make a bargain with you."

"What is it?"

"That we mutually refrain from harming one another."

"My good sir, until I know how I could

harm you, if I would, I cannot reply off-hand to that. I don't know enough about your affairs to see the way clear."

"Can you be relied upon to keep your hands off from us if we spare your life, and show you we have no connection with your present case? You might build up another by hunting us, and it is your promise not to do this that we want. You have shown courage which we admire—you are too brave a man to die for nothing. Will you live, and live as our friend?"

It was a proposition that would have astonished Royal Rock if it had not been just what he had played for. When he saw himself so helpless in their hands he had assumed a part, taking the one hope that he could arouse their admiration.

Had they been common ruffians it would have been a hopeless endeavor, but the plan had been tried. Now, it was bearing fruit. Could it be carried to the end?

"My dear sir," he replied, "I don't know any reason why I should be anything but your friend except for the fact that you have tried to kill me. This is a matter which carries no weight along with it if we succeed in getting on peace footing. I will remind you, however, that I know nothing about you, and if there is a truce between us you will have to enlighten me somewhat."

"If we do so will you promise not to use the knowledge to our hurt?"

"If I can promise in honor I will."

"Enough! We rely upon you."

Adam started to the front.

"I object!" he cried, warmly.

"Why?"

"He will betray us!"

"I think not."

"It is his trade."

"No brave man ever is a coward in honor any more than in other ways. The American has given his pledge; we will trust him!"

"You may; I will not!" asserted Adam, hotly. "We have too much at stake to give up our secrets to one whose whole soul is bound up in the catching of men by upright or sneaking means, as the case may be."

"The American has promised!" reiterated the leader, coldly, his gaze bent menacingly on Adam.

"And will you trust him?"

"I will."

"Then be the blame on you!" was the almost furious retort.

"You have said enough. There is not another objective voice among us. Who else does object, in secret or otherwise?"

Nobody answered.

"So be it," added Adam. "I wash my hands of the affair."

As he said this he looked again at Royal Rock, and the Detective Conqueror knew he had a personal enemy in the man whose life he had once spared.

But Adam fell back to the rear and let the others take all the business upon themselves.

He who was the controlling spirit called for wine and cigars, and all but the rebel took part in the devotion to good things. It was a curious situation when the sentiment of the crowd was considered only a little while before, but the detective had the reward of bravery and quick wit. Once more he was a "Conqueror," and in an original way.

The revelation came.

"We feel we can trust you," announced the leader. "No one is more of a patriot than the Americans. Warmly beats their heart for the good of their native land, and such men can understand the feelings of others when they see their liberties trodden under foot. Am I not right?"

"You are," Rock agreed, not without uneasiness.

Into what might his pledge of secrecy not lead him?

"Then hear me. We are survivors of the fruitless attempt to free Mexico from her yoke of bondage, and here in New York on a sacred errand. We failed in our attempt to free Mexico more because of treachery than any other thing, and those who betrayed us are now in this city. It is our purpose to avenge the wrong."

"In what way?"

"By death!"

The reply was very cool, and Rock saw he had not to deal with the most lofty of patriots.

"There is more in it. The men we seek fled hastily, to save their lives from our vengeance, but they took with them certain papers of great importance. Of course they will hand these papers over to the successful faction at the earliest moment, if allowed to do so. They dared not stay to do it then, but they will sell the documents as soon as they can, and with them, their souls."

"The papers are valuable, then?"

"They would incriminate many men who were our best friends in a quiet way, but who are now unsuspected."

Royal Rock had heard enough about the peculiar way of Mexican politics not to be surprised at this, though the method by which it was proposed to settle the matter was both surprising and alarming.

Death without trial was a rather severe fashion of terminating a man's life, especially on American soil.

"Where are those you seek to strike?"

"We do not know. One of them—Lucio Cano by name—we had almost in our grasp awhile ago, but he managed to give us the slip."

"Are you sure they are in New York?"

"Not now, but they came here."

The detective was silent. His promise to these men stipulated that he should not be compelled to hold their secrets at the expense of honor, but he and the men would have different ideas, he feared, as to what honor and dishonor were, and he could not feel himself called upon to remain quiet and allow them to seek other men and butcher them at their leisure.

"Perhaps you heard us mention the American General, Huntress?" the leader went on, after a pause.

"Yes."

"He was one of our most devoted helpers in the cause," announced the Mexican, frankly. "It is what has put him in trouble, now. He did not dare give up his correspondence with the leaders of the rival factions. Do you see?"

"Allow me to ask if you know this, or merely surmise it?"

"We cannot prove it, but who can doubt? Surely, he was the one who caused his papers to disappear, and as for the man killed there—"

The speaker paused, shrugged his shoulders and added:

"The Mexicans are not the only ones who remove those dangerous to them, sir."

Royal Rock was staggered. He could see that his companion believed all he asserted, but it was hard for him, even with all his previous suspicions, which pointed in the same direction, to credit all he heard.

Truly, he was in a veritable nest of iniquity if all this was true. With murders done and contemplated, and himself pledged to silence, he was deep in the web.

What would he not uncover in the effort?

"Now," went on the spokesman, "you know all. I think there is no difficulty to be settled between us, and that you will agree to my proposal."

Royal Rock looked at the line of men around him. He wanted to remind them he had promised only what he could do in honor, and then say he would not be party to the hiding of murderous plots, but he was too wise to be rash with that line around him.

"I shall not break my word," he returned.

"Enough! We trust you."

"I do not!" cried Adam, from the background. "I tell you this man will betray us if he gets a chance!"

"Peace!" the leader haughtily commanded.

"You have lost your head!"

"I, at least, am true to my trust."

But, Adam was ignored, and the leader went on to say some more friendly words. He ended by announcing:

"You are free to go whenever you will."

"Thank you; I shall have to accept the chance soon, but I will see you again, and, if such a thing is possible, I wish to invite you all to dine with me at a day not far distant. I trust we may remain good friends."

He was sincere in saying it, but he did not see how it was to be. The whole case was in deep waters, and a crash seemed certain.

He made no great haste to go, but, on the other hand, let no great time slip away. Bidding the party good-night, and accom-

panied to the door by the leader he finally left the house.

It was the end of an experience, in many respects the most remarkable of his career. He had saved his life by the exercise of singular coolness—saved it as few detectives ever had before—and the result had been a bewildering condition of affairs.

If all he had been told by the Mexican had come earlier in the case he would not have believed any part of it, but, now, all he had heard was in line with his own theories as far as he had studied the case out.

Never had he stood in such a situation before. And what was the situation? His late companions considered that he had promised secrecy. He understood nothing of the sort. He had said he would keep secret all they told him if he could do so with honor. Now, he did not think he could hide tales of murder done and contemplated and keep to honor.

"I must have time to think of this!" he thought, seriously. "I am bound to see exactly where I stand before I take decisive steps."

The next morning he found a letter in his mail which he read with interest. It was as follows:

"SEÑOR ROCK:—I am not pledged to anything. I make no promises and I break none. I think before I act. I can see the true and the false.

"They who did promise you last night were a lot of old women who cackled like a hen who thinks she has laid an egg when she has laid none. I despise them!

"Take heed! You have no pledge of mine. I am the same as of old. I it was who was to kill you: I will do the work. Take notice I am ever on your track. You shall die!

"This from him you know as

"ADAM SNOW

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PLOT FOR SAFETY.

RUTH HUNTRESS was in the general's private room when the latter entered. She looked up with an expression which had far more of eagerness than was usual to her.

"I have been looking at your official papers," she remarked. "You know I am your clerk, now."

"Yes," Huntress agreed, with a faint smile. "Did you find anything in your search worth mentioning?"

"One thing I considered so. I refer to your report after you left the border. I have read the copy you have here all through."

The general sighed deeply.

"It is more remarkable for what it does not tell than for what it does," he observed.

"I wish to mention some parts."

"Proceed, my dear!"

"You say in the report that you think you have made the report as full as need be, but that you will submit documents not then in shape as soon as your health will permit you to go over them and arrange them so they will be clear."

"A part of my weak device to gain time."

"Again, you say: 'I was constantly opposed by tricks on the part of the rival factions which, in some cases, I had to meet with stratagem, when open war upon them did not seem to accomplish the results aimed at.'"

"That referred only to the small, or bushwhacker bands. They were insignificant in numbers, but so full of devilish activity, as I may say, and so capable of mischief, that I had to deal with them as I could. They came over on American soil and had to be subdued. Strategy was more effective than force, in a few cases."

"I do not see that you in any place refer to the fact that your remarks were about these small bands."

"I think I did not so say."

"Again you write: 'Much more of my methods will be developed by the scattered memoranda hereafter to be systemized.'"

"The sarcasm of a man at the end of his rope. I was thinking of the results of my perfidy when it was known."

"Your perfidy! You call yourself a traitor. What is your crime?"

"Disloyalty to the United States!"

"In what way?"

"I have explained before, Ruth, but I

will repeat that I was put in command with strict injunctions to be blind to all but the fact that my Government was not in the fight. I was there to keep peace on the border, and had orders to be impartial. As far as possible I was to keep our soil free from the men of both factions. Ignoring my orders, I became a zealous partisan of the insurgents, accepted the promise of reward at their hands in case of success, and did help them covertly."

"Did this injure the United States Government?"

"No."

"Then what was your crime?"

"Disobedience of orders."

"Is that all?"

"Is it not enough?"

"It was unfortunate, but it does not carry with it the disgrace which an actual meanness would. Military rules are strict, I know, but I maintain you have not lost your honor."

"You speak with the voice of affection, not as a military leader. If the humblest soldier disobeys orders he is, at the very least, hopelessly disgraced. What, then, of the general who is thus guilty?"

"Anyhow, no harm came of your weakness, and it will not injure the country, or blot the page of history, if you are saved. You must be saved!"

"Impossible!"

"We will see!"

Ruth had for the time lost her gentle womanliness, and was as cold and calculating as a true diplomat.

She turned to the notes she had made, and from which she had already quoted.

"You intimate here that you have papers not yet submitted which will add force and clearness to your report, though not essential to it."

"Yes."

"Here is a chance for fine work."

"How?"

"Further on you refer to using stratagem when open warfare failed. You have explained what that meant. That explanation is all right for me, but more must come of it. A different explanation must be given your superiors."

"I do not see."

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature. As you have not harmed your country you are justified, I think, in making use of the means at your command and putting whatever construction on them you see fit, as long as it does no one harm. Your papers which Boaz has concealed must be produced boldly; you must present them to the Government; you must explain your illegal dealings with the insurgents by claiming that those incriminating papers were the result of the stratagems to which you refer. In other words you must explain your actual lapse of loyalty as an artifice on your part to entrap the insurgents more successfully!"

General Huntress's face lighted up suddenly.

"There is hope!" he cried.

"And success!"

"The plan will work. There can be no real proof adduced against me outside of my papers, and those of the insurgents written in reply to mine."

"Very likely the latter are destroyed."

"True."

"A bold front will carry you to success. You have the advantage of a career free from all blame and suspicion. Who can dispute you if you move with boldness?"

"Evidence might arise—"

"From those whose word is better than yours?"

"Luckily, no!"

"Then let us go on."

"But the events since we came here—"

"Can all be cleared away unless it be—"

"What?"

"The trouble about the death of Benson."

Huntress looked down at the floor and shook his head. He said nothing.

Ruth had hoped for something from him which would encourage her, but it did not come and she went on:

"I see nothing to prevent the success of this plan. You wrote that much of your methods would be developed by the submitting the scattered memoranda yet to be sent in. All is clear! Hope, and we shall win!

"We might, if this plan had been thought of at first."

"That period of time is gone. We are working for the present."

Not yet was the general sanguine, but Ruth was not to be discouraged. She had thought the matter out, and she believed the idea feasible. In any case it was the one chance, and she presented the fact until Huntress began to get sanguine, himself.

His disobedience of orders had never had any harm against the United States in its train; it had never threatened his own country; it had not been done in viciousness. Surely, if he could save himself he seemed justified in doing it.

"I leave all to you," he announced, at last.

"Then the plan shall be tried."

"When?"

"I cannot say. Give me a little time to perfect my arrangements."

The general grasped her hand warmly, and tears started to his eyes.

"My child, may God bless you! You do not know how much I have suffered in consequence of my folly. I know not how I yielded to temptation. I did not need the miserable acres of Mexican soil promised me as the reward of my ill-doing, yet I did yield. Why? I do not know."

Ruth believed she did. The occasional lapses of the general during the last few days told that he was no longer the iron-nerved and well-balanced soldier of old. While his mind was still strong enough for the usual duties of life it was not what it had been, and he had been less guilty than he, himself, thought.

Surely, it was the duty of humanity, no less than of filial devotion, for her to give her help in this crisis, and save him if she could.

One thing troubled her, however.

"Father," she said, "what about Benson?"

"Unfortunate affair! Why did he allow himself to be killed on our premises?" irritably demanded Huntress.

"If we could only solve the mystery."

"That's for the police to do," and there was a look almost of cunning on his face.

"Would they profit so much by it as we should? Consider! This happened in our house, or near it. Nobody has so much to gain by the solution of the mystery as we."

"Maybe!"

"Will it not be a blot on our name until it is known just who did it? We must know—"

"It is not our concern, and I care nothing about it," Huntress asserted. "Let the police solve the secret. Or it won't trouble me if they never do. I wish destruction had them all!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A GAME OF WITS.

GENERAL HUNTRESS spoke so irritably, and showed such a desire to abandon the subject that Ruth gave it up with a sigh. The reluctance of the general to talk about the murder, and his indifference to the success of justice, worried her.

If any one had advanced the theory that she believed her father guilty of connection with the crime she would have denied it with emphasis, and, perhaps, would have convinced herself that she believed her denial, but she was not, could not, be blind to the evidence in the case.

Have faith in the general she did, but forget she could not.

The singular combination of facts worried her not a little.

"If we are to make out such a report as I have referred to," she added, presently, "let us begin at once."

She went to the writing-desk.

"Now?" questioned Huntress, surprised.

"Yes."

"Why such haste?"

"If the plan is carried out there can be no delay. There has been too much already. I regret that I did not think of it at once when you confided in me. If Royal Rock learns the things you would be glad to have buried forever, you want your explanation already in the hands of the Government. We will tell the story as we have planned, and introduce a mild regret that

the lost papers are not at hand so you can refer to them more fully."

"You should have been the general, not I!" Huntress declared, regarding her with admiration. "You have the boldness which is the genius of war!"

"Let us write," replied Ruth.

It was only to get an outline, so they could study every word in due form, but for two hours father and daughter were busy over the composition. Before, Huntress had made a report simply as a soldier. This effort was not allowed to cover the other, but was—or it purported to be—the diplomatic end of the campaign.

When it was done the dalliance with the insurgents was duly explained as they wished, and his treason, as he regarded it, was set down so that, if believed, it would stand as rare shrewdness on his part.

Long and carefully Ruth studied it.

Would it be believed?

Huntress did not fail to understand that it might be thought that he was very late in making the report when he had already put in one, but the fact remained that much was yet to be done before the late troubles would be fully settled, and he had been excused from delaying at Washington on account of his ill health. There surely was some hope.

When she had finished she put the paper in the bosom of her dress, resolved that it should not leave her possession until it went to Washington.

The general lay down and she went to another part of the house.

It was barely half an hour later when the card of Royal Rock was brought to her. She sighed as she went to answer the summons. This detective worried her.

His manner was mild and deferential when they met, however.

He had inquired for her, now, not because it was really she whom he wished to see, but because he realized that in a measure the general had shifted the conduct of affairs to her, and he had as well accept this fact and come to terms at once.

Now, he felt he was to shake the calm composure with which she had met him before.

"I have come to compare notes with you, Miss Huntress," he remarked.

"Have you any news?" she demanded, with an appearance of eagerness.

"Oh! some things are sifting in, but I have not found all I wish yet. Is there more here?"

"No, sir."

"You keep all your servants?"

"Certainly."

"Don't you think you may have a black sheep among them?"

"You will remember I have always told you I had faith in them. I have not changed my mind."

"Then you don't think any of them can have had a hand in any of the difficulties?"

"If they had," answered Ruth, cautiously, for she began to suspect danger, "it would surprise me greatly. I believe in them fully."

"None of them will admit having seen the lost papers?"

"No, sir."

"Nor having seen Benson the night of his death?"

Quiet was the manner of the detective. Ruth did not like the question. She did not like to answer it direct, but there seemed to be no other way. Reluctantly she answered:

"They will not."

There was the slightest possible change in Royal Rock's manner.

"One of them tells a different story to me!" he announced, coolly.

"Sir?"

The detective leaned forward in his chair and, with his gaze fixed full upon Ruth, added:

"*Maria has confessed!*"

Ruth was not proof against the shock of the moment. The blood rushed to her cheeks, but not to remain there. It was a time for pallor—a time for despair.

"Confessed!" she echoed.

"Yes."

"What?"

"Just what she told you!"

Ruth set her teeth sharply. Well did she

know now the meaning of the question she had been so reluctant to answer. Her pre-sentiment had not been of folly; she had gone into a trap. Gone, and it was too late to retreat, it seemed.

"What has she told me?" was the steady inquiry.

"That she admitted Benson late on the night when he met his death."

Desperately Ruth had been trying to think of a way in which to meet the charge. If she was placed in the situation of having deliberately concealed events necessary to the People's case it would be a severe blow. She must not confess. What could she do?

"So the girl has been talking again!" she retorted, scornfully.

"She has told me what I have said."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about her?"

"I don't know that I did. Why?"

"The idea is strong in my mind that she may be wrong mentally. She did not tell me she let Mr. Benson in that night. Now, did she dream all this, or is she deranged?"

Rock was staggered. The question was so well put that even he was unable to discern the truth. Was she acting a false part, or was she sincere? He did not know, but he paid fresh tribute to her genius.

"Why should either be the case?" he replied.

"Because her story is absurd on the face of it."

"Why?"

"She cannot have done what she says. Why should Benson come as she asserts?"

"What did she tell you?"

Ruth grew cautious.

"Her story was rambling, and she acted as if her mind was not in proper condition. She may have told you something altogether different."

"May I ask what she told you?" persisted Rock.

"That she admitted Benson at the basement door," replied Ruth, feeling that she must speak or bring fresh suspicion upon herself, "and that he went up-stairs and disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as if he were a ghost—a very improbable tale on the surface."

"This was what she told me, but I fail to see wherein it is so improbable. What is wrong in your sight?"

"Mr. Benson had the freedom of the house at all times. He could come and go as he saw fit. Why should he enter in the way she alleges he did enter? If she is right he came here at an hour so late that he could not reasonably expect any of us to be astir. She chanced to be in the basement and admitted him. Before that we had passed over to him all our keys and directed him to look where he would. What more could he expect to find at that hour? We said we believed fully in our servants, but that their property was open to search. Could he expect to find more at midnight, when he could not go to their rooms, than he had done before?"

Calmly, quietly, logically Ruth made the plea. Her whole soul was bound up in it, and in the effort to ward off suspicion, but no undue eagerness was perceptible.

Royal Rock was staggered. He had thought that the revelation he had to make would confuse and overwhelm her. Instead, she was notably cool.

Was it innocence or matchless nerve?

He, or any other detective could have given a reason why Benson might have come there secretly, but it would not do to tell it to the young woman. So he had to reply quietly:

"All you say has force, I admit, but do you remember I found a man who averred he had seen Benson enter the basement door, before I knew of Maria?"

"Would he swear it in court?"

Royal Rock was silent. The prompt question was a center shot. He knew his man was not so sure as that. Ruth had won a point.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MAN UP-STAIRS.

THE detective was not long in finding his answer.

"As to taking oath in court I cannot yet

say, but, of course, your desire to further the ends of justice will prevent you from demanding cast-iron proof of all facts while we are in the preliminary stage. It is as much to your good as that of any one else that the whole truth should come to light."

"No one is more anxious for it to be so, but in considering the ends of justice, as you well express it, I cannot forget that injustice may enter into the matter," Ruth responded. "It is a serious charge to say the agent was seen to enter our house. I will believe it when I know it to be true."

"The two witnesses—"

"One not sure, and the other is a girl who told me her story with eyes wild and manner excited and unnatural."

"The shadow of the crime may have been on her."

"Or of mental disturbance. Understand me, sir, I am not arguing to assail your theory any further than to say I must be allowed to doubt until I have reason to do otherwise. I claim it was not natural for Mr. Benson to enter here thus."

"One thing is sure—Benson was slain."

"Yes."

"He was on this case."

"True."

"Where should he come on the block if not here? Why should he go into any other house?"

"A question as difficult to answer as my own, why should he come here?" sweetly replied Ruth. "But we waste time. I am seeking to be a detective, which I am not. I only have my theories, and that is why I uphold them. If I prove to be wrong no one will be more ready to admit the fact than I."

"You did not tell me Maria had given this story to you," quietly remarked Royal Rock.

"No, but I have been watching her closely, so that if she made any insane outbreak she would not do harm before she could be restrained of her liberty."

"You have not yet taken any such step, it seems."

"She has not been violent."

The detective gave it up. Either he had to deal with an innocent woman or with one of composure so great that he could not hope to shake it. He suspected it was the latter, but he gained new admiration for her in so thinking.

No one more admired shrewdness in others than he.

"Then you think we had better drop Maria, do you?" he asked, quickly.

"No. Let her mental condition be looked to. I will see to it, myself. We must know how much there is in this matter, so that if she really did admit Mr. Benson we can make the most of it. Shall I call her?"

"Not now."

"May I ask how you gained so much from her?"

"I know a friend of hers."

With this laconic reply Rock rose to go. Ruth believed it a manifest attempt to end the interview summarily, but she was by no means reluctant. She had been subjected to a very trying ordeal, already, and did not wish to prolong it.

The detective went and then Ruth rung the bell. It was Boaz Tucker who answered.

"Send Maria here!" directed Miss Huntress.

Boaz went away. The minutes passed, but Maria did not come, nor was there any sign that the summons was to be heeded until Boaz put in an appearance once more.

"I can't find Maria anywhere," he announced.

"Isn't she in her room?"

"She ain't in the house, and what is more nobody has seen her for several hours. The cook was looking for her long ago, but she wasn't to be found."

"That is singular!"

"So the cook said."

"Didn't she leave word with some one, or get leave to go out?"

"Neither of the two, miss. If she wasn't so homely I should say she had been kidnapped."

Boaz was joking, but the remark impressed Ruth in a different way. It was strange that Maria should vanish at the same time that Royal Rock gained so much news of her alleged association with Benson.

Had Boaz hit nearer the truth than he suspected?—had she, indeed, been kidnapped?

The idea was but momentary, but it brought another in its train. Had Royal Rock calmly taken possession of his witness? His explanation as to how he had learned so much of Maria and her sources of information had seemed unsatisfactory at the time, and it grew upon Ruth that her last theory had something in it. Unless Maria soon put in an appearance it would be safe to assume that she was where the detective had put her, wherever that might be.

So alarming was this belief, Ruth went to all the other servants, herself, and questioned them, thinking one or more might have information not yet divulged, but all stoutly denied any knowledge of the missing girl, and they were believed.

Maria had slipped out secretly. Where she had gone no one could say, but the fact that she had gone as she had, gave rise to the suspicion in Ruth's mind that the treachery had been premeditated.

The lines seemed contracting, and there was no knowing where the next blow would fall.

It would not have surprised the general's daughter to see Rock reappear with a force to arrest them all.

Before she had recovered from this shock another took place. To Ruth came Lieutenant Sheldon, serious and thoughtful.

"Miss Huntress," he began, "permit me to call your attention to a fact which seems singular to me. I have found a strange man in the garret of this house!"

Ruth could not control her face then. Blows were falling too thick for even her composure. She had not seen Lucio Cano for some days, but he was not forgotten, and she knew he must be the man referred to. Unlucky discovery!

"A strange man!" she murmured, faintly.

"Yes."

"A burglar?"

"That is what I do not know. He claims to be an old family servant, and says he is now ill, but I will admit I believed no part of his story. He has a little recess which is partitioned off roughly from the trunk-room—a singular place for any one to be. It occurred to me that the explanation of the lost papers might lie right there; that this concealed man might have taken them; but it seems absurd to suppose he has been there all this while without being regularly supplied with food. The theory that he is an interloper is strengthened by the fact that he was very much alarmed at sight of me."

John Sheldon, U. S. A., was a young man with a kind heart. He had seldom been kinder than then. By talking as long as he did he gave his present companion time to think, and to grasp at means of relief.

Trying to smile she lightly replied:

"For once your judgment errs, lieutenant. He is an old family servant, and there is a reason why he is there. You noticed an appearance of fear on his part, you say?"

"Yes."

"Possibly considerable wildness?"

"True!"

"He is not right mentally."

"Oh!"

"Wrong here, poor fellow!" and Ruth touched her forehead, illustratively. "A sad case, since he has been so long in the family. It is not odd that you noticed the wildness in his manner. He is quite harmless, however."

"I did not know of his presence here before."

"He is a silent partner in the household as I may say. His mania is to avoid people, and to do this successfully he has that little recess for his use."

Sheldon looked down at the floor. He was ready to take Miss Huntress's word in all things, and to follow where she led, but he was not dull enough to fail to see that if the alleged old servant was less harmless than was claimed there was chance right there for an explanation of all the strange things which had occurred in the house.

Ruth saw danger in the silence.

"I presume you noticed he was bedridden?" she inquired, with sweet utterance and an appearance of sorrow.

"Oh! is he?"

"I regret to say it."

She did, though not in the sense she would have Sheldon think. His face cleared.

"Oh! is he?" he repeated.

"Have no fear of him; he is harmless."

"I understand."

"Did he say more to you?" Ruth inquired.

"No, he was not disposed to talk."

"His timidity is singular. He did not use to be so, but it is his belief, now, that all men are his foes. Retiring to a degree, we cannot do more for him than to give him the solitude he craves. I think he would be much worse mentally if he were taken away, for excitement worries him, and he cannot endure strangers. Of course he deserves something of us after all his faithful service."

"I am sure you are very kind to take such an interest in him!" declared the lieutenant.

"Every one would not think of doing for a servant. It proves your noble nature. I refer," the speaker added, a little awkwardly, "to your father and the rest of your family."

"You are very good, Lieutenant Sheldon, though I might have known you would appreciate the situation."

John looked pleased, but soon grew thoughtful again. He gazed at the floor long and attentively, and then remarked:

"Since this is purely a family matter I presume you see no necessity for its being mentioned outside?"

It was just what Ruth wished to say, but her courage had not been equal to it. This practice of binding Sheldon to silence on every point where he made discoveries was audacious in the extreme, and though it had thus far worked well it seemed there must be a limit.

Even her influence had its end somewhere.

But with the matter broached by Sheldon she replied with eagerness she could hardly conceal:

"I do think just this, lieutenant, and as the poor fellow is not an active member of the human family, now, it would be very kind in us to make no mention of him."

"We will not," the infatuated young man averred. "I'll leave him to you and forget all about it!"

He had his reward. Ruth thanked him warmly, while she thought:

"Another danger passed for the time. How long will such luck last?"

CHAPTER XXIX.

CLEARING THE WAY.

THE following morning a document left the Huntress house which, perhaps, would settle the question of whether the general was to have an honorable place among the soldiers of his native land, or that of an officer false to his trust.

It was the paper so carefully prepared by Ruth; the paper which calmly told of the negotiations the general had held with the rival factions in Mexico, but gave out the inference in a matter-of-fact way that all his negotiations had been in a strategic spirit, and that he was never in earnest in treating with the insurgents.

The plan was one magnificent in its audacity.

Would it succeed?

This was the question Ruth asked herself time and again after the step was irrevocably taken. Possibly she had hastened the ruin which threatened them, but it was a great and daring stroke, let the result be what it might.

"Your reputation will carry you through, father," she asserted.

"Melancholy is the condition of the man who has to rely upon past honors to save himself from present disgrace!" sighed Huntress.

"Who could be more devoted than you were at heart?"

"I doubt myself; I don't understand myself. Would I had never gone to that accursed Southern land. I suffered all the while I was there; the climate did not agree with me, and the heat made my head feel strangely. I think I should have succumbed had I stayed much longer."

These chance utterances were of much value to Ruth. Huntress had sided with the insurgents because they had promised him a few hundred acres of land in Mexico. The value of this property was considerable,

but he was already wealthy, and he did not need the addition in the least. Then why had he risked honor for such a paltry acquisition?

Little by little Ruth was solving the question. The heat of the Southwest border had exercised an injurious influence upon the old soldier. How far it had gone he did not realize, himself, but she was learning a little at a time.

Thankful, indeed, was she to believe that it was mental disturbance which had been responsible for his lapse from loyalty. With such a noble record of the past she felt she could conscientiously put forth every effort to save him, now.

Shortly after the mailing of the document Lieutenant Sheldon came to Ruth. His expression was both grave and disconsolate.

"Miss Huntress," he announced, "I have received orders from Washington."

She grew alarmed.

"To what effect?"

"I am about to leave you."

"To leave us?"

Sheldon bowed with manifest emotion. Twice he made effort to speak. The third attempt was more successful, but his voice trembled as he explained:

"I am ordered to join a regiment at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, at once!"

If the young man had possessed enough of courage to look her in the face he would have been shocked to see a look of joy flash into existence. He studied the floor so pertinaciously, however, that he missed that unpleasant experience, and she was soon herself. Her reply came gently:

"Is it possible our little family is to be broken up?"

"So it seems," and Sheldon sighed a prodigious sigh. "This paper has just arrived, and I have nothing to do but to obey. Immediate, is the term of the order, and that means just what it says. It always does in military matters. As soon as I can pack my few belongings I start for Washington, thence to go to Texas."

"And you are wholly done here?"

"All done!"

"Why in the world do they act like this?"

"I think I can tell. It is the work of that meddlesome fellow, Royal Rock. I have not failed to suspect there might be trouble from him. His regard has never been one of friendship when looking at me. In fact, Mr. Royal Rock thinks he carries the whole city of New York in his vest-pocket, and that no one else has any brains!"

"He is not a pleasant person."

"Pleasant? I should say not! I am sure he has reported at Washington that I am incompetent. Yet, I will defy him to say wherein I have ever neglected my duty."

Quickly Ruth looked forward to the speaker's arrival at Washington. Once there he might be subjected to questioning which would bring out the things which her skill had prevented him from telling to Royal Rock.

"Detectives like to get all the credit," she artfully commented, "and I do not doubt that Mr. Rock would have been glad to have you uncover a good deal of duplicity here, after which he could step in and win much glory on what you had learned. You can guess if you would have secured any credit, no matter how much you had learned."

"Not one iota would I have got. All would have gone to him. I am glad luck did not enable me to make any such discoveries."

Sheldon looked down at the floor once more and added slowly:

"If Rock knew of the man in the garret, and the pocketbook found under the carpet, he would doubtless make much of the facts, but neither he nor any one else will hear of them."

"Lieutenant, you are very kind!" and Ruth gave him her hand.

"I am only too glad to do you a service, Miss Huntress. I have never liked my position here as a Government agent, but I trust I have not failed to conduct myself as a gentleman as well as an officer?"

The lieutenant had not seen much of society in late years, and he was not designed for a parlor knight, but he had a good face.

Now, when the nearness of the season of parting made him forget his diffidence, he looked into Ruth's eyes in such a frank, manly way that, for the first time, his good qualities began to make themselves visible to her.

Circumstances had made her a schemer against him, and she was now pained that she should have been compelled to take the step.

"Your kindness and delicacy have been marked, constant and ever pleasant," she answered. "I trust you will find congenial and pleasant acquaintances wherever you go. We shall think of you with friendly interest, and when you are again in New York I shall be glad to see you. Don't fail to call."

Lieutenant John was in the seventh heaven of rapture, but he did not venture to say so. He regarded Ruth as an impossibility in his life, and would not have intruded on the shrine he had set up.

Thus, his reply was merely friendly, while his feelings were otherwise, and, after the conversation had been somewhat longer carried on, he left her to make the last arrangements for going.

In an hour Lieutenant John Sheldon, U. S. A., was only a memory in the house.

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief when he was gone. One danger was surmounted. With this gain came desire for another, and she went to her father.

"Does Lucio Cano gain any?" she asked.

"He thinks not."

"Be that as it may, he must leave this house!"

"How can he?" Huntress demanded, in surprise.

"Has it never occurred to you that he may be playing a part? He has a good shelter. It is natural he should want to keep it, but it is to our vital interests that he go immediately. Whether he is shamming or not he must master strength and courage to get out. You had another refuge for him when he claimed to be ill. To that refuge he must go, well or ill."

Her decision took Huntress's breath away, but the plan was so much in the line of his desires that he exclaimed:

"Go on, and may Providence aid you. He is a constant danger while here; if you can get him out, do so!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE NEWSPAPER ITEM.

RUTH unfolded her plan for getting Lucio Cano out of the house.

"The spy across the way seemed to be ever on the watch, and never to sleep," she observed. "We cannot hope to pass the Mexican out unseen by him. Let him see Cano if he must, but he shall not recognize him unless he is keener than we think any man is likely to be in this matter-of-fact world."

"Do you intend to disguise Lucio?" Huntress asked.

"I do. He shall go out as a female servant. Clad in woman's garments, and sent at an hour by no means late, he is likely to deceive the spy—at least, let us hope so."

"Excellent!" the general cried.

"Another thing!"

"What is it, my diplomatic ally?" almost gaily demanded the old soldier.

"Your lost papers must be found."

"How?"

"They must be returned to you by mail with the statement that the thief has found them of no value. It can do no harm after the report we have sent to Washington."

"Again I approve. All is being bridged over famously."

"All except the murder of Benson."

"Ruth," seriously remarked Huntress, "I have a theory in that case."

"What is it?" the girl inquired, eagerly.

"I believe, and have all along had the same fear, that it was Maude Hollywood who did that deed. Who else could it have been? It seems certain to me that Benson must have got into this house. Who should harm him unless it was Maude? Who had a motive to harm him except Maude and myself?"

A great weight was lifted from Ruth's mind. She could not so readily believe that Maude had the power to kill a strong

man, but it was possible, and it was a great relief to hear the general speak so freely of the crime. He never had done so before.

"Would Maude be guilty of such a deed?" she asked.

"She is a political adventuress. I admit I would not have thought her a murderess, but many people have taken that part in life who were not deemed capable of it."

"Have you spoken to her?"

"I accused her plainly."

"And she?"

"Denied it, of course."

"If we could only prove it!"

"We dare not! Let her be accused and she would be likely to turn upon us. She would tell all about the episode in my Southern career."

"But if you succeed in making the report to Washington be believed, what will you care?"

"True; I had not thought of that. There is still hope, but it must not be you or I who unmasks Maude. It is too risky. Let her go on and hold her secret if she can."

Half an hour later Ruth left her father. It was but a few moments subsequent when she was recalled by a message from him. She found him laboring under a degree of excitement which was surprising. He held a newspaper in his hand, and, extending it toward Ruth, he exclaimed:

"Read!"

His finger indicated the place, and she saw the head-lines which showed it to be an interview with one Colonel Worthley. She remembered the name as that of one of General Huntress's associates on the border:

"Read!" again directed the general, and he pointed to a paragraph half-way down the interview. "Read aloud!"

Ruth obeyed:

"Continuing, the colonel spoke in high terms of the work of General Huntress in handling the opposing forces on the border. He said the old soldier accomplished as much by strategy as he did otherwise, and used diplomacy with rare skill. In order to keep the rival factions off from American soil he made each believe it possessed the sympathy of the Americans, and though he could show no partiality, he hoped that in order to hold that sympathy they would avoid angering the United States Government, and refrain from crossing the river to the neutral soil. The artifice worked well; it was heeded, and many a long chase in the hot Southern sun was spared our soldiers. Too much praise could not be given Huntress, Colonel Worthley thought!"

Ruth was interrupted.

"Now?" cried Huntress, with triumph.

"Thank Heaven! the colonel has paved the way for our own explanation!" Ruth murmured.

"But I cannot understand how he got his news!" muttered the general.

"Here is more. Listen! 'All this plan was explained to Worthley at the time. One day Huntress had been so affected by the extreme heat that he nearly had a sunstroke. Sitting under one of the few trees to be found, his head tied in medicine-saturated cloths, Huntress told the whole to Worthley as related here—'"

"I told him!" gasped the general.

"So the account says," Ruth replied.

"But I did not!"

"Then why does he say so?"

Huntress looked thoroughly bewildered.

"Can it be," he spoke at last, "that I was not always myself down there? I was at the point of genuine sunstroke several times. Did I tell him, then?"

"If you did, it was your salvation!" and tears of joy filled the girl's eyes. "You surely did tell him, thanks to the fever in your blood. Father!" and she caught at his arm. "how much of your negotiations with the insurgents was due to that same fever—to the evil effects of the burning sun?"

"You mean—"

"That you never were guilty of disobedience of orders, willingly or willfully. It was when you were under the ban of illness that you treated with the Mexican rebels."

Huntress began to tremble.

"Can it be? Can it— But, no; it is too much like a thing of the stage; too good to be true. Yet, I was often half prostrated—"

"Yes, but never disloyal! Oh! father, see this as it is; see that you are clear in fact, as you are in my estimation!"

Ruth threw her arms around his neck and burst into tears. It was the first real relief of nature since the trouble began, and the relief went to her very heart.

Nathaniel Huntress was little less affected, and as he stood with his arm about her waist he was speechless with emotion, and he trembled perceptibly.

For a long while neither had anything to say, but they gradually became calmer. The interview was read more at length, and it was found to be an unqualified indorsement of the general's policy in the Southwest. Whether he was ever accused or not it could not but be of great value to him.

When they had grown calmer they discussed the matter more at length. Each was of the opinion that the sky was clearing, and they would have been very hopeful had it not been for the fact of Benson's murder. That tragedy was still unexplained, and it would haunt them until it was solved fully.

A knock sounded at the door. Answering the invitation given, Maude Hollywood entered. She was in a mood rather down-cast.

"I bring you bad news, old comrade," she announced, addressing the general. "I am about to leave you!"

"To leave us?"

"Yes, I am going to flit away like a ghost of the night, despite my one-fifty pounds of flesh, which is over-weight for a ghost. I leave your hospitable mansion in two or three days."

"This is sudden."

"So it is, but I am longing for change and excitement, and I can't get it here. Your only issue is the fate of poor, dear Benson, and that troubles me more than I can tell. Dear man! he died so young—not more than fifty-five, and a capital subject for a flirtation, if properly handled, I do believe."

"Mrs. Hollywood, who do you think killed Benson?" asked Ruth, abruptly.

"My dear child, I can't tell," Maude responded, fanning herself with assiduity. "Of course he couldn't commit suicide, but there my information rests. Suppose we let the dear departed rest while you say you are sorry to have me go."

"You surely are joking—"

"I surely am not!"

"Will you break up our social circle?"

"Yes, for it is not lively enough. Benson's ghost stalks through every room, and we have no mirth or frivolity. Stay? I thank you, but it is settled."

It would never do to refrain from saying something polite, and both the general and his daughter did their duty in this respect. Maude was pleased, or seemed to be.

"You are very kind, you touch my heart. Unparalleled devotion!—milk of human kindness! But though I go I will return, and we will have many happy days, yet. Perchance, old comrade, we shall yet sojourn again on the tented border. Saint Catherine! but we *did* live in those days! Your hand, comrade, and may your shadow never grow less!"

She rose and put out her own chubby hand, while they tried to hide the relief she had given them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MAUDE'S LOYALTY IS TESTED.

MAUDE HOLLYWOOD left the house and walked down the street. If her acquaintances of the Huntress name could have followed her they would have gained much doubt of her loyalty to their interests.

She went straight to a certain corner. There she looked expectantly as if for some well-defined purpose and person, nor was she disappointed. Royal Rock was not far away, and he hastened to join her.

"I am glad to see you so prompt," he remarked.

"Am I ever otherwise?" demanded Maude, airily.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Promptness is the soul of righteous endeavor and divine accomplishment. She who is late at an engagement is liable to be late when the pearly gates of Paradise close forever."

"You are a poet, I see."

"Only in an amateur way."

"Perhaps it does not interfere with your appetite?"

"Not an atom. It is only the reader of poetry that waxes pale and omits beefsteaks and kindred things of the flesh."

While speaking they had been walking on in a way which showed that both had a clear understanding of the object in view when they met. They brought up at a restaurant, and were soon engaged in eating.

Maude was in her best spirits, and she talked with all of her lightness and abandon, but Rock only awaited a chance to introduce serious matters. Finally he inquired:

"How are your friends, the Huntresses?"

"Dear friends!—the gallant general, the lovely daughter, the handsome son, the intellectual cook, and all the rest! Thank you, Mr. Rock, they are in glorious health."

"The death of Benson does not weigh upon their spirits, I judge."

"Does it not? We all weep for that amiable man! Men are so scarce, anyhow, and for one to be cut off at the untimely age of fifty-five is positively distressing. We all weep, I assure you."

"A soldier like you should be hardened to such things."

"A soldier like me?"

"You will remember I told you I knew of your career in Mexico."

"I remember you thought you did. Men are the most inveterate lovers of gossip on the face of the globe. Now, a woman is full of charity, and she always lets a sister or a brother down easy. She has a kind feeling for them—especially for the brother."

"You still insist you are not the political plotter I have accused you of being?"

"Saint Catherine! yes; would you have a lamb like me parade in a wolf's skin? And I so young and innocent!"

Rock was not getting on fast. The boundless cheek and skill of the adventuress stood her in good use at all times, and she would laugh down accusations which would overwhelm other women.

"Mrs. Hollywood, can't we be of mutual use to each other?" the detective asked.

"I hope so, Mr. Rock."

"Then tell me of Huntress and the secrets of his household."

"I only wish I could!" sighed Maude. "If there was a secret in the concern it would give me unalloyed pleasure to get at it, and, of course I would let you in, too. Alas! I fear there is no secret!"

"Mrs. Hollywood, be sensible. Down on the border you and Huntress were schemers against the Government of Mexico. All the events at Huntress's have grown out of it—"

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes"

"Fame is yours when you prove it!" sweetly remarked Maude.

Rock did not meet the shot unmoved. He wanted to take this woman and wrest her secrets from her, but, unfortunately, that method of getting information was not in date, and he could only regret its subsidence.

"Maude, do you know there are men in this city who are your sworn enemies?—who are seeking you with knife in one hand and—"

"Old lovers of mine, I dare say."

"Bitter foes; men to whom the fall of the plotters of Mexico meant ruin, and who have sworn to kill all who had a hand in it."

Mrs. Hollywood was unmoved.

"Terrible fellows, ain't they? I'm glad I wasn't one of the gang."

"You may need help to get away from them. Why can't you be reasonable and deserve this aid? Help me and I will help you. I know you and Huntress played the part I have mentioned down there. Aid me to prove it; confess so I can have official news to go with my revelation—"

"Dear boy, have you seen the papers of to-day?"

"What do you mean?"

Maude produced a clipping.

"Read!" she directed.

It was the interview with Colonel Worthley, and when Royal was once started he found it interesting enough to hold his attention. Maude watched him with a covert smile. She knew how it must affect him, and she gloried in it. Fickle as she was in

political matters she had no element of disloyalty in her nature to Huntress, and though she had let Rock apparently work upon her sympathies whenever he would, she had no idea of betraying her "old comrade." Doubtful as she had been by the Huntresses, she was resisting all temptation to betray them.

The detective's face told no tales as he read, but when he looked up there was a change in his manner.

"Who inspired this interview?" he sharply asked.

"Eh?"

"Does Huntress's hand or yours show in this lie?" was the blunt demand.

"My dear friend, don't use such violent language! The interview is doubtless genuine, and I think nobody ever influenced Worthley to give it. But you will see by it that your theory that Huntress was disloyal was an error. If you abandon that theory," added the adventuress, sweetly, "you may be able to get at the truth. Please don't set the dear old general or myself down as devils in the flesh, for that we are not. Be charitable, for we deserve well of you!"

Rock glanced over the interview again. When he was done he asked Maude no more questions. He had learned that she would not betray any secret willingly; he knew she was too shrewd to be decoyed into compromising statements, and this interview so changed matters that he desired time to think before going ahead too fast.

Quietly avoiding the things he had been so anxious to talk about he made enough of further reference to the points discussed so that he would not show how severe he regarded the set-back, and then paved the way for an ending of the interview which would still keep up his dignity as a detective.

When Maude was gone, however, he did not fail to give his disappointment full sway. Standing on a street-corner he meditated on the newspaper article.

"Can I have been deceived by my friends, the Mexicans? Has Huntress been guilty of no lapse of loyalty? Did I study all this out, and then have it corroborated, only to learn at this date that I am all wrong? I can't believe it. Yet," and the detective grew more thoughtful. "I would gladly see it so. Any glory I might gain out of this affair would be far less of value to me than it would to see the old soldier come out of it triumphantly. I wish he might, but the evidence—"

Pausing, he shook his head.

"Even now the evidence is against him!"

A stir near at hand aroused the detective from his abstraction. He looked sharply toward the corner without seeming to do so. The result brought a quick change to his face.

Adam Snow, the knife-man of the Mexican gang, was there, keeping partially back from sight, but eying the detective watchfully.

Royal Rock frowned.

"The fool is still bent on killing me. I hate to do it, but if I find him skulking around again I shall have to put the screws on him. He must let me alone or go to the Tombs. As for his comrades, they have outlived their usefulness and had better receive a hint to get out of New York. Their mission is not in keeping with the ways of our city; they must go."

Adam still kept to the corner, and Rock suddenly wheeled and walked over to him.

The knife-man seemed undecided what to do and ended by doing nothing. Confronted by Rock he stood and looked at him sullenly. He did not think of making an open attack. He had tested Royal's nerve on a former occasion, and knew that in an open fight he had no chance against the man he aspired to kill.

"Well," sharply spoke Rock, "what are you doing here?"

"I am minding my own business!" growled Adam.

"Stick to it! If you undertake to mind that of others you may get into trouble."

"I shall mind my business, senor."

"Yes, but your business is to kill me!" Royal retorted. "Give up your plan. The methods of your clique are not New York fashion, and, to be frank, you are the biggest fool of the lot. Your comrades have raised the crusade against me, but you want

to keep it up. You are trying to get another chance to use that knife on me. Drop it! Sink your idea forever!"

Adam continued sulky.

"Don't forget my warning," added Rock. "Let me catch you following me once more and you go to prison. You would go now but for the truce I have with your allies. It will not save you again. Keep it in mind!"

With this warning he turned and hurried away. Adam allowed him to go, but the look sent after him was full of undying purpose.

"I'll kill him yet!" muttered Adam.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE HAND OF THE VENDETTA.

NOT far had Royal Rock gone when he heard footsteps behind him. Since he became a participant in the deeds and ways of the men from Mexico it had also become his business to see what all footsteps meant, for the price of safety was unceasing vigilance when assassins flourished so strongly.

He turned to investigate.

There was nothing to alarm him now, for he saw John Smith, his faithful watcher.

"You have news!"

So spoke Royal, though how he knew it was a mystery. John Smith's face was as sphinx-like as face could be.

"I have," agreed the watcher.

"From Huntress's house?"

"Nothing new there. I still sit by the window, statue-like, except when my relief takes my place. When he does I have chance to see other things, you know."

"What have you seen?"

"Is Maude Hollywood of value to you as a witness?"

"She is liable to be, if she ever consents to talk."

"Then look well to her. The Mexicans intend to kill her this night, and the scheme is to have you entangled in the deed so as to have it appear that you killed her."

"The dickens it is!" exclaimed the detective.

"Even so."

"Let me on to this."

"As you are well aware there is no good will toward Maude on the part of the Mexicans—you need no explanation why. She is to be killed for her treachery to the cause of the faction in Mexico to which they belonged. It is purely an act of revenge, for she can harm them no more."

"The wires are all laid to lure her to a place near the foot of Twenty-third street; I know not exactly where. She will meet them near the ferry-house, North River. Then she will be lured to some place on a plausible pretext, and duly dispatched."

"Being near the river they can have a good deal of scope, and they think they will escape all right."

"They will leave near her body evidence which seems to connect you with her taking off, and rely upon the fact that you have been seen in her company to involve you hopelessly."

John Smith ceased, and a smile curled Royal's lips.

"They seem to think a breath of suspicion is enough to convict a man of murder, even if he is a detective. How did you learn this?"

"By shadowing the Greasers when I was off duty."

"Do you require no sleep?"

"Well asked," admitted the watcher; "but I was restless, so I rose and looked around. This was the result."

"When is this decoy to be sprung?"

"This evening."

"At what hour?"

"They spoke of its being just dark when she arrived at the ferry."

"Enough! I will be at the rendezvous, too. I have no cause to love Maude Hollywood, but she is a witness I do not want out of sight until I know who killed Benson. Because of that it is as important to save her as if she was as good as gold."

"I thought so."

"Have you any idea as to where she was to be lured?"

"A shanty by the river was mentioned, but not definitely enough for me to be positive that they hoped to take her there. Make a note of it, though."

"I will."
 "If I could accompany you—"
 "It is time for you to relieve your associate."
 "Yes."
 "Better go; I can care for all this."
 "They may be many in number."
 "I will head Maude off at the ferry-house."
 "Beware of the Mexicans!"
 "I will."

John Smith did not seem satisfied, but he insisted no further. He left the detective and soon disappeared.

Royal Rock was not surprised at the news he had heard. Anything was to be expected with such men at the front as the disappointed revolutionists and with their vendetta in full blast.

It might have been possible for him to see Maude before she went on the errand, and stop her from going to the place of meeting at all, but certain words she had dropped casually made him doubt if he would find her by such a step, and, on the other hand, if he could save her from the present danger when she was almost in the trap he would have a small chance of winning her good will.

This decided him to let matters go on to the desired length, and he acted accordingly.

Day was giving place to darkness when he arrived at the corner of Twenty-third street which fronted the ferry-house. He looked around to see if anybody else was waiting there. Several persons were moving, but none of them was stationary except a youth who was leaning negligently against a post.

This youth had a very "tough" look, but he did not seem to be a Mexican. There was no sign of Maude.

Royal loitered for several minutes. The night shadows grew deeper, but he saw none of the persons he was searching for. He began to grow uneasy. He approached the hard-looking youth.

"May I ask if you have been here long?" he inquired.

The tough youth eyed him sharply.
 "Say, be you a detective?" he demanded, suspiciously.

"No."
 "Don't want me ter move on, eh?"
 "I do not."
 "Dat's all right, then. Wal, I've been here some time."

"Have you seen anybody else waiting?"
 "Naw!"
 "No woman?"
 "Naw! Got a 'date' wid de old girl?"
 "This is not a love affair, my friend. Yet, I hoped to meet a woman here."

"Say, boss, you can't depend on dem females fer a cent. See? Dey will jest do a feller dirt; de females will. Don't be surprised ef yer 'date' misses fire. See?"

"You are sure you have not seen her?"
 "Yes. Dere has been women goin' an' comin' ter de ferry-house, but dat is all—all but one who met a Eyetalian-lookin' feller an' went down dere."

He jerked his arm southward. The motion was not so much as the words. A Mexican and an Italian might well seem one to a casual observer, and Royal caught at the speech at once.

"Describe the woman!" he requested, quickly.

The youth did so, and when he was done the detective felt sure it was Maude who had been seen. The only doubt was, did the tough youth belong to the gang? A little questioning satisfied Royal on this point, and then he pursued:

"How far did you watch them?"
 "Not at all."
 "Do you know of a shanty down there?"
 "Several of them."
 "And do you know the vicinity well?"
 "Sure, Mike!"
 "Do you want to earn a few dollars by guiding me?"

"Now you are roarin'!" declared the youth, with enthusiasm. "I'll help you to de end ef de stuff is forthcomin', by gee! Say, is dere a scrap likely ter be on?"

"There may be."

"Hully gee! count me in, boss! When dere's a scrap you hev only to sneeze an' I'll be dere—see?"

"Yes."
 "Go on; I'm wid yez. Tip Crawley is me name."
 Tip was all in earnest. Why should he not be, with the prospect of both a fight and money?—his pet hobbies.

Royal was worried about Maude. After all she had, it seemed, run into the trap, and the chances of being in time to do her any good were few. Only one thing could he do, and that was to act with zeal.

Led by Tip Crawley he moved down the street. It was a rough place. Various piers and landings lined the river, and the whole region was unfinished. There were nooks in abundance where dark deeds could be done, and law-breakers hide.

The guide was not troubled with anything like indecision. He walked with a confident swagger, and began to develop the secrets of the place. With the skill of one used to his surroundings he told what each structure was, and indicated how to see those that were open to inspection.

This showed that he was a capable guide, but it did not develop those sought for, and Royal grew uneasy.

Where had they gone?
 He studied Tip Crawley, wondering if it was possible to trust such a person, and ended by deciding that he must be trusted if anything was to come of the venture. Putting a ten-dollar bank note in the tough youth's hand, the detective remarked:

"I am here to win this case, or to get so badly left that we shall both be losers. Settle down to business and help me win, and you shall not suffer, I assure you."

"Say, boss, you do me heart good!" declared Tip, almost breathless with joy. "We'll find dem blokes or lose a rib. Come on!"

From that time his zeal was unlimited, and he poked into divers unexpected places with headlong avidity. Still, time was passing, and as it grew more apparent to Royal that the avengers were having all the opportunity they desired to put Maude out of the way he became decidedly nervous.

"We must be close to them now," encouragingly remarked Tip, who was feeling some fear that he would lose his job. "Jes' you keep yer upper lip from bumpin' yer chin, an' we'll land de race. See?"

"Hush!"
 "Wot?"
 "See yonder man! Be still an' let us watch him."

"Dat's a Dago, by cheel!"
 Royal did not think so, but he had other notions as to the dark-skinned man he had noticed come from a side street and turn toward the river. "Mexican" was written all over his face, and the detective gained new courage.

They followed, but the hunted man suddenly, craftily, and without a betraying glance broke off his walk by turning and entering an old house by the way.

"Caged!" Rock exclaimed.
 "Did you hear de key go 'click?'"
 "Yes; we are locked out," admitted Royal.

"Shall we break in de door?"
 "I wish it was not necessary, for I am not sure he is the man I seek, and I don't want—"

"Come wid me!"
 "Where?"
 "I know dat house, boss, an' ef you'll handle de legs wid me I'll show you a way in that won't let the secret take a tumble."
 "Lead on!"

Tip hastened around to the rear of the house by means of a short detour, so as to attract no attention, and pointed to a shed which fronted upon the wall of the house.

"See de light in the winder?" he inquired.
 "Yes."

"It's the only one that shows, an' you kin gamble yer reds that ef you go there you kin see dem all. See?"

"You know the house, you say. Who lives there?"

"Dad Moses. Lives all alone, an' will do what he's paid fer. It won't do you any harm ter look in on him, fer the old man wouldn't dare blow to the police."

"Climb, then!"
 It was not a hard task, and the two adventurers mounted to the roof of the shed.

Then they advanced along the shaking foundation to get still further view. Royal loosened his revolver. The time was at hand when the weapon might be needed.

CHAPTER XXXIII. WITH THE AVENGERS.

THE detective was not pleased with the way on which they had to walk.

"Isn't there danger of the roof of this shed breaking in?" he asked, of Tip Crawley.

"I guess not, an' ef it does, w'ot then?" replied the tough youth. "We must git used ter takin' chances, or we ain't o' no account. We ain't kids. See?"

Royal did not reply, but, as the roof continued to shake, he remained of the opinion that they were liable to fall through.

Gaining the window of the main part of the place he looked within.

"They're dere!" muttered Tip.

They were there—several men, and one woman. The game was hived; the woman was Maude Hollywood, and the men were the swarthy Mexicans. Royal easily recognized Adam Snow among them. Another thing was certain, and it was that Maude was a prisoner. Her hands were bound, and she was surrounded by the men who were her sworn foes.

In this crisis the demeanor of the woman was surprising. She must have known her peril, but her calmness was unshaken, outwardly.

Even while the detective gained this view the door opened and the man who had been seen on the street entered. At once all assumed the air of those before a master. Eager to hear all, Royal cautiously raised the sash.

The leader was duly addressed.
 "Captain, we have waited long for you." said one of the band.

"I have been delayed, but I am here, at last."
 "We have the prisoner."

"So I see."

The captain wasted no time, but confronted Maude with his dark face grim and ominous.

"Woman," he abruptly exclaimed, "the hour of vengeance has come!"
 Maude smiled into his face.

"To what do you refer?" she inquired.
 "You have been hunted by those whom you betrayed in Mexico, and you are found now. You know the result of treachery."

"As a comrade of the wild days when we tried for liberty," answered the adventurer, coolly, "I know all. Is there a traitor?"

"Yes."
 "Is he here?"

"She is here, for it is you. Devil and Judas! the hour of justice is come. The cause of liberty would have succeeded in fair Mexico but for traitors, and you did more harm than all the rest—"

"Pardon, comrade, but you err," calmly interrupted Maude. "You are all at sea; I am not and never was false to the insurgent cause. I was with them, heart and soul; a loyal worker from the first. Traitor? Never, comrade; never!"

"Woman, you lie!"
 "Again, pardon me, for you are all wrong—"

Adam Snow started forward.
 "Why do you waste time with her?" he cried. "The creature has the nerve of a tigress, and she can smile in the face of death. Why waste time on her? She knows she is guilty, and so do we. We may lose all by delay. Let the judgment proceed!"

"You are right, Manuel Orestes. There need be no more vain talk about this. Prisoner, the council has sat on your case and rendered its verdict. The decision is 'Death' and this night—ay, this hour, you die!"

For a moment Maude's gaze wavered. Well did she know the inexorable will of the band, and it was hard to keep up the fictitious calmness then.

"If you do me harm you will injure an innocent woman," she persisted, after a pause.

"The evidence is positive, and no trick of yours can save you. Manuel Orestes!"

The so-called Adam advanced.
 "Is your knife ready?" pursued the leader.

"It is."

"You will drive the blade to the heart of this woman. To her we give just five minutes. When the time is up she dies!"

Royal Rock turned to Tip Crawley.

"Go for help," whispered the detective. "Accost the nearest patrolman, and bid him summon what men he can get. This is a desperate gang!"

"Hully chee! I should say so!" agreed Tip. "Dey send de shivers down me sciatic nerve. I'm off!"

The speaker turned. He was somewhat upset by the scene within, and he forgot to plant his heavy feet with care. One step he took—then the roof of the shed creaked ominously.

"Look out!" cried Royal.

The warning did no good. The weakness of the structure, early noticed, did not enable it to bear much, and the first sign was followed by a great crash as the whole top fell in. Down it went, nor was that the worst.

Royal and Tip went with it!

The detective tried to arrest the fall, but he was in a position where all efforts were in vain, and he paused not until he touched the floor with a heavy thump, the fall barely broken by the jostling of the timbers which went with them.

Happily he was not injured, and he leaped to his feet as quickly as he could. He had expected to be plunged into darkness, but the result surprised him.

The interior of the shed was but a part of the room where the gang were, and the un-introduced visitors were in their presence.

A general cry arose from the avengers.

"Police!" cried Adam, in his native language.

Royal Rock was the first to recover his wits. There was no way but to confront the gang, and only one way to do it. Whipping out his revolver he leaped at them like a panther.

He reached them; he clubbed the weapon and gave blow after blow with telling effect; he seemed to be a machine of swift action, and the Mexicans reeled back from that assault, but they were men accustomed to wild life. They rallied, and the assault was no longer one-sided.

Fiercely all attacked the detective.

He lost no part of his courage, and the gang met with stout resistance. Lustily Royal struck out still, but there seemed to be a cloud about him, with enemies everywhere, and all eager for his life. That one of them was especially so was soon shown.

"Ah!" hissed a voice in his ear, "I'll have you now! Die!"

The detective looked and saw the evil eyes of Adam Snow gleaming by his side—saw the well-known, ugly knife raised for the blow, and when he would have tried to check the weapon his own arm was seized by another Mexican.

Adam struck.

He struck, but the blow fell weakly. He had received a blow, himself, which came just in the instant of necessity, and the knife did not touch the detective.

Then Adam fell as a big fist took him under the ear.

"Hully chee! don't get too gay!" cried another voice. "I am wid ye, me ducks!"

It was Tip Crawley, and the speech was not Tip's sole contribution. His blood was up, and like an avenging demon he plunged into the gang. His fists flew wildly, but never in vain.

"Count me in fer dis cake-walk!" added the tough youth, as he pummeled famously.

It was a welcome relief for Royal, and he rallied as he saw that he had such good help. Together they laid about them, and the gang fell back steadily, but in confusion, toward the door.

The leader glanced around anxiously. Certain facts impressed themselves on his mind, and he suddenly shouted a few words in his own language. The result was almost magical.

The single lamp which lighted the room was suddenly shivered by a blow, and the room was plunged into darkness. Another instant and the two intruders found nobody to fight them.

"Look out dat they don't give ye one in de bread-basket!" warned Tip Crawley.

The words were enough to recall to Royal's

mind the fact that Adam carried a dangerous knife, and he joined Tip in retreating to the further side of the room. There they waited while utter silence was all around them. The seconds wore on, but no attack came.

"Do you hear anything?" finally asked Royal.

"Not a whisper," replied Tip.

"Fools!" exclaimed another voice, "don't you understand the truth? My wits are sharp enough to guess that all have fled."

It was Maude who advanced the idea, but, though it seemed reasonable enough in one way, the detective was not prepared to believe that men so desperate would retreat so tamely.

Tip took a more hazardous view of the matter, and made a plunge through the darkness to learn the truth. It was soon learned; the theory of the adventuress was proven correct.

Every person but the trio had gone from the house.

"Weepin' sisters! jest ter think dey hev all evaded de coppers!" lamented Tip.

Royal was not so sorry. The fight had stirred him against the gang more than ever, but he was not eager, even then, to arrest them until his other plans had more matured. Anyhow, they were gone, and the house was no longer a place of danger.

Maude had been somewhat shaken by her peril, but she regained her composure much quicker than was to be expected.

"Dear boy!" she exclaimed, with her usual fervor, "you have proved a jewel in the time of need, and I love you for it. I do indeed!"

"Did I not warn you to beware of them?" returned Royal.

"You did, surely, and I will never give them another chance. They lured me here by using the name of an old friend, but I shall be lured no more. To think the men should want to injure me, when I—oh! I was as loyal to the insurgent cause as woman could be. I was, I swear!"

She told the lie glibly, and Royal wasted no more time over her. She would stick to her text at all times.

He conducted her from the house and called a carriage to convey her home. No more was seen of the gang, and the detective let the matter rest right where it was.

The adventure was over, and the Mexicans had received a salutary lesson. If they were satisfied so was he. And so was Tip Crawley, who bubbled over with enthusiasm.

"De prettiest 'scrap' on record!" declared the tough youth. "Say, but didn't we jest smash 'em? Hully chee! it was jest prime fun. I'll sleep de better fer this, fer it's manly sport. See?"

Royal did not linger long with his aid, but, giving Tip a reward which pleased the latter well, returned to his own room and passed a peaceful night. The next day he received a note by mail which had for its contents this one line:

"TO ROYAL ROCK:—

"I live; I have my knife; I shall use it.

"ADAM SNOW."

The detective smiled calmly.

"Bravely said, Adam, but I may strike ahead of you!" he murmured.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BLOW FALLS.

ONE of the rooms of the Huntress house became the scene of activity soon after dinner that night. Ralph Huntress, Boaz Tucker and Lucio Cano were there, and engaged in making a radical change in Lucio's personal appearance.

In accordance with Ruth's plan he was to be transformed into a woman in seeming, and try to get out of the house unseen, or, at least, undetected, by the watchers.

Lucio had protested warmly against the plan and talked much about not being physically able to go, but Ruth was not to be driven from her idea. Lucio yielded when assured he was to have another good, and, perhaps, even for him, safer place of refuge.

When he finally fell into line and tried to do his share he manifested a degree of strength which suggested the suspicion that he had done a good deal of shamming in regard to his alleged illness in the past.

Fitted out in the clothes of a servant he was made as near perfect by other devices as amateurs in the art could make them.

Then he was compelled to practice the step of a woman, and at this he did so well as to awaken Ralph's hearty approval.

"All we want now is luck and we shall save you, sure!" he asserted.

"Ah! but what if the enemy are there—my enemies—with their knives?"

"You cannot stay here forever."

"True, true!"

"I think you over-estimate the danger, and that there is no likelihood of your seeing those you say are your enemies—"

"You don't know them; they are always on the watch. They are merciless, too, and will kill me if they have opportunity. But I agree with you that I had better go to the new refuge. Now that I have decided on it I am eager to get away. Do not understand me as opposing the plan. It is good, and I shall be far safer there. You are all very good to me, and you shall find I am not ungrateful if I ever have a chance to aid you or your good father."

"Thank you, Lucio."

"The general's troubles are heavy, but they may lighten," added Lucio, seriously. "I hope they will, for I have had much to do with bringing them upon him, I fear. Good-luck be yours, all!"

Cano was in a mood of unusual gravity, and the low cunning which commonly marked his nature was not so apparent. His was not a noble or even passable nature, but he was more worthy of respect in this present frame of mind than before.

While they were thus occupied in one part of the house something of interest was occurring in another room.

Shortly before the postman on the beat had come along in his round. Just ahead of him a gentleman ascended the steps of the Huntress residence and rung the bell.

As the door was open at the right time the letter-carrier went to the same door and handed a bulky package to the servant.

"For General Huntress," he explained, to the servant.

At that moment the general happened along the hall. He greeted the person who had rung the bell, who was none other than Royal Rock, and received the package at about the same time. By his invitation the detective went to the private room.

"I will excuse you while you examine your mail," remarked Rock, politely.

"Thank you, sir; it is probably of but little consequence, and not likely to take me long."

Well did Huntress know what was in the stout wrapper, and he was rejoicing to think that Rock should have happened along at that time, but his hands did not tremble as he opened the package.

Sight of it, however, brought a sudden change, as plain as if it had been genuine, to his face.

"Great heavens!" he exclaimed.

"What now?" Rock inquired.

"My lost papers are here! What in the world—But here is a letter. What can it say? Read!—my eyes fail me now!"

The old soldier's hands shook as he put out the letter. Considerably surprised Royal Rock read aloud:

"GENERAL HUNTRESS:—I have no use for the papers which I inclose. The only thing which I care for in this world is what will bring hard cash. Your account of the war in Mexico may be good reading for some book-worms, but it don't go with me. It strikes me as rot. It would not buy me one of my beloved drinks. Hence, this restoration. Happy New Year, and all these things, old man!"

"AN UNREPENTANT THIEF."

The last word was read and Rock looked at his companion wonderingly. Even to his experienced mind the letter seemed genuine, with its peculiarities of construction, but he did not waver. Instead of believing it what it purported to be he mentally inquired:

"What means this new trick?"

General Huntress, however, looked exultant.

"Thank Heaven!" he exclaimed. "This is more than I dared to expect, but it is none the less welcome. The thief estimated the value of the papers below par. I, though, would have given him a thousand dollars for them, if need be. Recovered! By all that's good, this is great luck!"

For a moment Rock wavered. The acting was so good that he was staggered in his belief. Could it be he had wronged the old soldier? The thing seemed possible for a moment. Then he returned to his belief. Mentally he remarked that it was an old saying that the hider could find, but he kept his views to himself.

"Let me see if anything is missing!" added Huntress.

He went over the lot carefully and announced that all was there. He had more to say. He said it well, too, and Rock let him talk.

The latter did not attempt to see the papers. He was not the representative of the Government to that extent, and he did not care to go beyond the limits of his just duties.

Downstairs Lucio Cano was ready for the venture he was to make. Those who were helping him were not aware that Royal Rock was in the house, and it would have made but little difference if they had been aware of the fact.

Dressed as a servant girl the Mexican stood by the door. He had distinct orders, and expected to be in another refuge in a short time. As soon as he had cleared the block Ralph was to follow and act in conjunction with him.

He shook both his companions by the hand.

"I am happier than before in many days," he asserted. "I thank you for planning this change. Now open the door!"

It was done and he passed out. Ralph and Boaz kept well back. They heard him open the basement gate and then reclose it. Then—

Suddenly there was a cry outside and something fell heavily.

"What was that?" Ralph demanded, excitedly.

"Open the door!" hastily responded Boaz.

Already Ralph had started to do so, and he soon had the way clear. Almost the first thing he saw was Lucio Cano, still and prostrate. No one else was to be seen, but the sound of hurried footsteps called his attention and he took another step and saw a man fleeing down the street. Then from the house across the way—the house which had so long held the silent watcher—another man darted out and pursued the first with long, rapid steps.

It was John Smith, the spy of Royal Rock, on the trail!

But, Ralph and Boaz thought only of Lucio Cano. They bent over him and his continued stillness sent a chill to their hearts. The hand which Ralph laid upon him encountered something wet and warm. He took it away—it was stained with blood.

"A murder!" the young man gasped.

His words floated to other ears than those of Boaz Tucker. The front door of the house had just opened, and a man who stood there, having first had his attention arrested by the rapid movements of John Smith, now caught the exclamation from Ralph's lips.

It was Royal Rock, and he caught at all with a rapidity born of long experience. The fleeing man, the pursuit of John Smith—he believed he knew what that meant, and he was ready for the drama in the basement, whatever that might be.

Quickly he hurried down to that point.

"What has happened?" he demanded.

Ralph was aghast. What could be worse than the presence of the detective at that moment?

Boaz made a frantic attempt to smooth the matter over.

"Some stranger has been done to death here," he explained. "We found him."

The last part was obscure. The first of it was a falsehood, and Ralph's first impression was that Boaz had made a bad break, but to his surprise the voice of Lucio Cano rose feebly.

"Yes, I'm a stranger, and I fell among thieves," he remarked. "He did me to my death; I've got my last hurt."

Impulsively Royal Rock took a step to see if the assassin and his pursuer were still in sight. Lucio improved the opportunity. He caught at Ralph's sleeve and pulled him closer to himself.

"Be calm!" he whispered. "I'm a dying man, but I'll save you from being mixed

up in it. Stick to it that I'm a stranger; I will!"

Royal turned back. He had missed the one thing, the one moment when there was anything to be learned of the case. After that he could watch and listen, but the understanding had been arrived at between those whose interests were not his.

CHAPTER XXXV.

LIGHT AT LAST.

ROYAL ROCK took charge.

"Help me to carry this man into your house!" he said to Boaz, with an air of authority, but it was Ralph who moved first to aid him.

Young Huntress's heart was heavy. Despite the promise of safety held out by Lucio Cano he had no real hope of avoiding the trouble; the blow which had so long threatened now seemed sure to fall.

The Mexican was laid on a lounge in the kitchen.

"Go for a doctor!" Rock ordered, to Boaz, and the servant hastened away, but Lucio shook his head feebly.

"It's a priest, and a man who can take my sworn statement, I want," he explained.

"You shall have both," Rock answered; "but, tell me how all this happened."

"It was Manuel Orestes, who is sometimes known as Adam Snow, who killed me. He is my sworn enemy, and he accomplished his work."

"What were you doing here?"

"Trying to enter this house in disguise!" boldly returned Lucio.

"Why?"

"My confession will tell. Get me those I have asked for."

His steadfastness encouraged Ralph somewhat. A messenger was selected from among the servants, and he hurried away.

The detective had some knowledge of medicine, and he looked to Lucio's hurts. He had two wounds from a knife, and their depth told the observer what would have been the result if Adam had had a chance to use the weapon on him. Lucio was the calmest man there. He had been a coward in the past, since his coming to the Huntress house, but he felt he had his death-wound, and he took it with all the coolness of a philosopher.

A notary public lived next door and he was soon on the scene, but before then another man had come to Royal Rock. It was John Smith, the watcher, quiet and unobtrusive.

"A dead man down yonder!" he remarked. "The person who did the killing fled from me, but I was running him down surely when he, careless of his course, dashed into the street directly in front of a passing team. He was run over and instantly killed."

"Exit, Adam Snow!" murmured Rock.

Adam's victim was ready to talk. As the others stood around him, and the notary prepared to take his statement, there were anxious hearts among those who listened. The doctor had pronounced the wound fatal, and it seemed sure to Ralph that Lucio would weaken in the crisis and keep nothing back.

But, the dying man did not waver.

"My name is Lucio Cano," he began, "and I am a Mexican. I was one of the participants in the last revolution in my native land. I fell under the ban of men who did not like my course, and to save my life from their knives I fled to this city."

"When I arrived here I found the foe always on my track, and there was no peace for me."

"I learned that an American agent named George Benson had been taken into the service of my enemies, to aid in running me to earth, and I had to avoid him, too."

"I was in need of money, and I determined to raise some by robbery. An American general named Huntress had figured on the border, and I believed him to be rich. I decided he must give to me of his store, and I came here to rob him."

"It was not hard for me to force the basement door, but just as I had done it who should appear but the agent, Benson! He accused me of being a burglar. I assured him we knew each other, the General Huntress and I. He said we would prove it by seeing the general."

"We entered the house and went to the private room of the general. I was watch-

ing my chance, and I took down from the wall the sword which hung there and dealt the agent a terrible blow."

"Benson fell dead. Then I tossed his body into the back yard. I had come to rob, but I was frightened, and with my courage all gone I fled."

"This night I came again. I had disguised myself as a woman, and I hoped to gain entrance by cajoling some of the servants. My plan did not work; my old foe, Adam Snow, was on my track. He struck me with the knife and my life is ebbing with the blow."

"I die as the fool dies. I tried to be a robber and I have failed utterly. I have no more to tell, but this story I give to you in good faith. There has been much wonder who killed Benson. I am the man! He hounded me, and I had no other way to do."

It was an erratic confession in many ways, but the weakness of the fast-sinking man was accountable for much of this, and what was due to other causes was ascribed by the notary to the same weakness.

Not so with Ralph. Well aware that much was false in the statement, he wondered how much was true.

Was the account of Benson's end to be relied upon?

Royal Rock was silent. He had been duly observant. He noticed all and drew his conclusions. He had some doubts, but his desire to see General Huntress cleared, if such a thing could be, prevented him from expressing any opinion of the confession.

It was put on paper and signed by the fast-falling Mexican. Often Lucio glanced at Ralph, and the latter suspected that he had something to say in private. The chance was given after awhile.

When the notary's work was done he did not linger. Rock accompanied him to the door, and Lucio motioned quickly to Ralph. Hurriedly he whispered:

"It was I who killed Benson. I was not at any time so weak or ill as I would have had you think, then, for I was bound not to leave this house."

"The night that Benson was killed I left my hiding-place in the attic and came downstairs. Benson had been admitted by the servant girl, as she told you, so my step was a mad one. It was a fatal step."

"I was hiding in the general's private room when Benson entered and caught me there. I had taken down the sword as the only weapon at hand. When he lighted the gas and saw me I was seized with the fury of fear and the desire of self-protection. I struck him with the hilt of the sword and he fell dead."

"I threw his body into the back yard. I had taken his pocketbook and contents, but grew suddenly fearful that it would bring trouble to me, so I finally thrust it under the carpet, where it was found by the young lieutenant, later."

"My deed had terrified me. I returned to my hiding-place in the attic and remained there, and never until now have I let any one know the truth. It is all told now."

"Of course you know that much that I have told to the notary is false, but I would not bring trouble upon you by having it known I had been secreted here by you. Let my story go as I have told it. What is false can harm no one; what is true will save you."

"It will save my father!" Ralph murmured.

"Ay, that is what I mean. The general—he is good and kind. I am glad to help him as he has helped me. Ah! the change comes!—this is death!"

He moved restlessly; his eyes closed, only to open again and fix a gaze on something no one else saw.

"May my soul be saved!" he gasped.

Again his eyes closed; his form trembled; then he lay still.

Lucio Cano was dead!

Ralph looked toward the hall. Royal Rock was standing there. Had he overheard the talk? The fear was in the young man's mind, but the detective came forward quietly and had nothing startling to say.

The city newspapers announced that the murder of George Benson was fully explained, and the explanation given was the same Lucio Cano had made to the notary.

On the surface this left the Huntress family free; but, peace of mind was not yet theirs. They feared that the next few days would bring developments not expected by outsiders after the newspaper article; but, what did occur was this:

Maude Hollywood took her departure and nothing was said. She went in the same calm mood of old, and, as chance would have it, disappeared forever from the sight of the Huntresses. They have heard of her as still scheming in Mexico, but she comes to them no more.

From Washington came official papers commending the general highly for his part in the war on the border. And never one word of censure or doubt reached him! After a month he resigned, giving the state of his health as a reason. He left an honored name, and no whisper of his one-time mistakes has ever been heard.

The entire matter dropped out of sight. Benson, Cano and Adam sleep in their graves. With them ended all.

There always was a doubt of Royal Rock; a fear that he might yet do harm; but one day he met Ralph on the street and, smiling, said:

"Nobody knows better than I that the whole truth was not divulged in those days, but I am content. I would not see an old soldier suffer for what I am convinced was his misfortune, not his fault. Your secret is safe with me. I never shall try to win glory by making more known. I am content; report says I found the murderer of Benson. It is enough. As to the further events, I am forever silent!"

And from that hour the Huntress family lived in peace and happiness, relying upon Rock's word that there would be no trouble.

The detective had a talk with the remaining Mexicans, and convinced them that their methods were not suited to New York. They thereupon returned to their own country.

General Nathaniel Huntress lives in peace surrounded by those he loves best, and the lifting of the shadow has made their home a happy one. Boaz feels that the family honor owes as much to him as any one, and his faith in the general has never been shaken.

One event not looked for occurred. John Sheldon resigned his place in the Government service and returned to New York, where he engaged in other business. He renewed his acquaintance with Ruth, and before two years had gone by there was a wedding at the house which united the fortunes of the young people forever.

He is now a keen, successful business man, and he and Ruth seem well fitted for each other's life-company.

Royal Rock pursues the even tenor of his way, running down city criminals, and whatever he knows of the affairs at Huntress house is safe in his keeping.

THE END.

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